BIRGITTA WELZEL

FLORIES

Birgitta Welzel

Stories

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About this collection

The Sediment. On a North Sea tidal island, an ageing mechanic sits before a broken laptop and reads the same email for the third time. He has known the woman who wrote it since childhood. And she knows him — perhaps better than he can bear. Before he replies, his knee gives out.

From Which He Had Bidden Her to Rise. In the Year 2061. A virus has rendered most people unable to read complex sentences. What no one can read any longer is lost — among it a novella by Heinrich von Kleist. Four people attempt to retrieve it with the help of a language model from 2030. The question that arises in the process is older than the virus: what is there in a literary text that exceeds what can be said?

Volaron, or The Witness in Apparent Death. Burghard Brenner, surgeon, pioneer of women's advancement, and virtuoso of pharmacological self-optimisation, is dragged into court by an ungrateful protégé. In the witness box he freezes into a living statue — apparently dead for an hour, yet no one notices. The story of a blindness that comes from within.

Distinction. He teaches Bourdieu, knows every register of cultural capital, and is writing a book on origin and habitus. Then Nadine from Herne gets in touch — a woman from his scholarship days, now working at a travel agency, now married. An affair begins in which she performs cultivation and he fails to see what he could explain to any of his students.

Hedigel. Steinbeck, Westphalia, 1947. Hedwig Pätzold lives with three children in two rooms above the Brinkmanns' calf pen — provisionally, as she tells herself each morning. Her husband writes from American captivity, the house in Gleiwitz is gone. What remains she passes on: the bearing, the sign of the cross, the priest's gaze that tells you that you are seen. She is not a bad mother. A story about what passes from one generation to the next — unasked, unquestioned, complete.

Table of content

The Sediment 5

From Which He Had Bidden Her to Rise 34

Volaron, or The Witness in Apparent Death 78

Distinction 127

Hedigel 202

The Sediment

Kurt stared at the screen. The laptop he'd bought used just before the move had to be angled just right, or the image turned milky. Maren's email was there. After a year of silence.

He read. The letters blurred before his eyes, but he forced himself to continue.

Kurt,

You write that I broke off contact. But do you remember our last phone call? You said: "Then forget it." And then you hung up.

I waited a day. Then a week. Then a month. I waited for a sign from you that you didn't mean it. But nothing came.

The three months we wrote to each other were important to me. I'd forgotten what it's like to talk to someone who knows me from before. Who knows how Dagebüll smelled, how the mud flats felt, how quiet it was after a storm. No one here understands that.

I still remember the night in the harbor shed. I know you think it was only a goodbye for me. But it was more. It was the first time I felt truly close to someone. Even though I left the next day.

I don't know if you'll read this email. I don't know if you'll answer. But I wanted to tell you: if you want to talk—about then, about now, about anything—I'm here. You don't have to prove you're right. You don't have to test me. You can just write. If you want.

Maren

He read the words once. Twice. Three times. His heart hammered against his ribs. The knee stabbed with each pulse, as if someone were driving a needle into the joint capsule.

She was still there. She was trying to build a bridge. All he had to do was answer honestly.

He clicked "Reply." Three seconds until the new window opened. The cursor blinked in the empty text field.

"Maren," he typed.

Then he stared at the word. Her name under his fingers.

What did he really want?

He wanted her to come back. To see how he lived here, on the *Hallig*, and understand that this was the real world. He wanted her to admire his hardness, like back at the bird cemetery. He wanted—

No.

That wasn't the truth.

The truth was: he wanted her to stay. Just stay. To write, to answer, to be there. So he wouldn't be alone.

But how could he write that?

"I want us to write too," he typed.

He stared at the sentence. It sounded so thin, so pathetic. It wasn't enough. She had opened her heart to him, and all he could give back was this flat, fearful sentence.

He pressed Delete.

"Tomorrow," he said aloud into the empty kitchen. "Tomorrow I'll find the right words."

He closed the laptop and went to the lorry.

That had been four weeks ago.

No, that wasn't right. The story had begun much longer ago.

Kurt examined his right hand in the cold glow of the kitchen lamp. The fingernails were rimmed with a permanent, deep-black edge that no brush in the world could reach anymore; it was the sediment of four decades of maintenance work, baked into the cracks of his skin like bitumen into an old coastal road. He rubbed his thumb over the scarred tip of his index finger. It felt like sandpaper. He had been proud of this dirt.

Had been.

For decades, the company had maintained coastal drainage systems—pumping stations, sluices, machinery you could touch. Then came the contract for the offshore wind farm. Suddenly everything was digital, networked, complex. Suddenly they needed teams, not individual mechanics. Kurt stayed. Most of his old colleagues didn't. The old colleagues left, new ones came. People who sat in front of screens instead of operating machines. At the firm they'd all had these soft hands lately, smelling of moisturizer—manicured nails, cleanly cut cuticles, sometimes even polished. Young men with titles like "Innovation Lead," who held iPads like sacred relics and when they heard the word "maintenance" thought of software updates, not grease and seized bolts. They'd praised him away. "Early retirement" was the word they'd sucked like candy, when in truth they were just removing the old engine because it droned too loud for them in their new, silent transmission.

But maybe that was a lie too. Maybe they hadn't praised him away because he was too loud, but because he'd never learned to work with others.

He'd worked for decades for a single supervisor. Schröder. A man who'd still worked with his hands before becoming foreman. Schröder hadn't talked much. He'd told Kurt in the morning what needed doing, and Kurt had done it. Well. Reliably. Without discussion. In the evening Schröder had checked, nodded, and that was it. Clear hierarchy. Clear tasks. No meetings, no "open conversations," no teamwork.

Schröder had retired six years ago. After that, everything had changed.

When the company switched to teamwork—flat hierarchies, collaborative problem-solving, "agile processes," all that modern shit—Kurt had been the only one who couldn't play along. Or wouldn't. He didn't know himself what the difference was. They suddenly wanted him to sit in meetings and "contribute ideas" and "develop solutions as a team." But when he said something—usually a joke, he thought, to break the ice—they just looked at him. Smiled politely. Moved on to the next point.

When the jokes didn't work, he tried differently: he explained. How to do maintenance properly. What really mattered. The young colleagues nodded politely, looked at each other, moved on. He didn't notice them rolling their eyes.

He'd shut down. It felt like having to undress in front of strangers.

They'd tried. For a few months. Then came the offer for early retirement.

He remembered his last day. No one had organized a farewell party. He'd cleared out his locker, handed in his keys, and left. In the parking lot he'd turned around and looked at the building where he'd spent forty years of his life.

He'd felt nothing.

The *Hallig* had been an accident. He'd seen an ad: "Lorry keeper wanted, accommodation provided." It sounded simple. It sounded like a place where you could be alone and still be needed.

He'd been wrong.

Momme came by on the second day. A man in his late forties, tall and broad in the shoulders, with massive forearms and hands that looked like they could effortlessly dismantle an engine or steer a boat through heavy seas. He wore a heavy woolen fisherman's sweater, a yellow PVC jacket slung over one shoulder. He smiled when Kurt opened the door.

"Moin. Momme. Live over there." He gestured vaguely toward the *Koog*. "Thought I'd stop by. You're new."

Kurt stood in the doorway in his dark blue quilted work jacket, its elbows gleaming with old oil. He'd had it since the start of his working life, and it had become so much a part of him that he would have felt incomplete without it. The fabric had grown stiff and rough over the years, the oil stains, the smell of metal and grease—that was who he was.

"Kurt."

"Good. You got everything wat you need?"

"Managing."

Momme nodded. "Goot. If not—I'm going over Thursday with the boat. Shopping. You can make a list if you need wat."

"I'm fine."

"Sure. But if you do." Momme made no move to leave. He leaned against the doorframe, relaxed. "About the lorry. You looked at it yet?"

"Not yet. I'll do it tomorrow."

"Goot. If you need gear—I've got most of it."

"I have tools," Kurt said.

Momme looked at him. A second longer than necessary.

"Yeah, goot. And with bigger jobs, you know, we usually pitch in together. The lorry belongs to everyone here."

Kurt felt something contract inside him. Pitch in together. Usually. He hadn't come here to work on a team. He'd come here to have his peace.

"I'll manage," he said. "I've maintained machines for forty years."

Momme raised his hands placatingly. "Sure. Just saying—if you ever need a hand. Two's easier for some things."

Kurt nodded. "Thanks. If something comes up, I'll let you know."

Momme nodded back. "All right then."

He left.

In the first weeks Momme came by several times. Always with a reason, always friendly.

Once he stood at the door again. "I'm going to the dike later. Show you where the water comes up at high tide."

Kurt went along. When they stood at the dike, Momme pointed at the stones. "See that line there, the algae? It comes up to—"

"Yeah, sure," Kurt interrupted. "You can see that from the deposits. But really you'd need to put in additional drainage here. Then you'd have fewer problems with standing water."

Momme looked at him. Said nothing.

"I used to work a lot with drainage systems," Kurt continued. "The principle's always the same. When the water has no outlet, it backs up. Simple physics."

"I see," Momme said.

They walked back. The silence between them was heavy, something was wrong. Kurt felt it, couldn't leave it like that.

"You know what the difference is between a lorry and a marriage?" he said.

Momme looked at him questioningly.

"With the lorry you at least know why it's squeaking."

Momme smiled politely. Briefly. Then turned away and walked on.

Kurt watched him go. The joke hadn't gone over well. But maybe Momme just wasn't one who laughed much.

When Momme came the next time—"Storm coming tomorrow, did you see the warning?"—Kurt was already at the lorry.

"Yeah, I saw it. But I don't think it'll be that bad. The wind's coming from northwest, not north. The *Hallig*'s in the lee."

"Still," Momme said. "Better safe."

"Sure, sure. But I've been through plenty of storms. You have to be able to read the wind direction. And the air pressure. It only dropped slightly this morning, so—"

"I'll go secure the boats then," Momme said.

He didn't wait for Kurt's explanation.

After a few months Momme came by less often. When they encountered each other, he nodded. Briefly. Politely. But he didn't stop anymore. He didn't ask if Kurt needed anything.

Kurt told himself that was fine with him. Maybe Momme had finally understood that Kurt managed alone. That he didn't need anyone to explain the *Hallig* to him. He had forty years of experience. He knew how machines worked, how systems worked.

Momme had probably just realized that Kurt was no beginner.

But sometimes, when Kurt sat in the kitchen in the evening and the silence of the *Hallig* lay on him like a wet blanket, he remembered Momme's face when he'd explained the drainage at the dike to him. That brief silence. That nod.

Maybe I should have let him finish talking, he thought. Once. Just to see what it was like.

Then he drank another beer and pushed the thought away.

Maren's first letter came several weeks after her brother's death. A real letter, on paper, with American stamps, that had taken three weeks to reach the *Hallig*.

She wrote about her brother's cancer, about his Berlin apartment, about the slow fading. The letter was factual, almost sober. Kurt read it twice and wondered why she was writing to him. They hadn't been in contact for decades.

Then came the passage that made him listen.

There's no one left from Dagebüll who remembers him. No one who knew him as a child. Our parents are both dead. You're the only one who still knows what he was like back then. On the dike crest, with his book. How he wouldn't come down to us. How we looked, back then.

The last "back then" was crossed out. With ballpoint pen, once, quickly. But legible.

Do you remember the bird cemetery? I think about it sometimes. About the black lumps in the sand. About your hands, how you dug the graves without hesitating. I think I admired you back then.

Kurt stared at the crossed-out "back then." At the "we."

She'd written it. Then regretted it. Then left it anyway.

He folded the letter and put it in the top drawer, under the old bills and instruction manuals, where no one would find it.

But in the evenings, when the *Hallig* grew dark and the loneliness unbearable, he took it out. He read the passage about her brother. And then he looked at the crossed-out word. *How we looked, back then.*

He was the only one who still remembered her child's face. She'd almost said it. But not quite.

And then she'd written about the bird cemetery. *I think I admired you back then.*

He read the sentence again and again. Why was she writing this to him? What did she want from him? Or did she want anything at all—except someone who still remembered?

The bird cemetery. She remembered.

It had been after an autumn storm. They'd been maybe ten, eleven years old. The mudflats were strewn with dead birds—gulls, oystercatchers, even a few eiders. Black, wet lumps in the sand, some still with open eyes.

Maren had stopped. She'd bent down to one of the gulls and tried with her small fingers to wipe the oil from the feathers. Carefully, as if she could still help the bird. But the feathers were cold and stiff, the body underneath heavy and dead. After a few seconds she'd pulled her hand back. Then she'd started crying.

Kurt had collected the birds. One after another. With bare hands. The carcasses were cold and heavy, the feathers matted with oil and saltwater and mud. He'd carried them to the dike and dug graves there—with his hands, without a shovel, small hollows in the wet sand, just deep enough. The sand was cold and sticky, settled under his fingernails, stained his palms black.

Then he'd searched the beach for driftwood and tar, made small crosses from the wood pieces and glued them together with the black, viscous tar. The tar stuck to his fingers, smelled acrid and sweet, wouldn't wash off for days.

Maren had watched, silent, the tears still on her cheeks.

For her it had been an act of care. Kurt took care of the dead. Kurt gave them a grave. Kurt was strong enough to touch the dead things she couldn't touch. To dig his hands into the cold sand, to not shy from the tar.

But for Kurt it had been something else. It was the first time he'd understood: when he touched what others shrank from—the cold carcasses, the wet sand, the sticky tar—then he had power. Then they looked at him. Then they admired him.

Later he'd brought her a dead gull, just to see if she'd cry again. She had.

He'd been able to steer her. Through the dead. Through the dirt.

I think I admired you back then.

He'd answered. Of course he'd answered.

The three months they'd written to each other had been the happiest time of his adult life.

He knew how pathetic that sounded. Three months of email exchange with a woman who lived on the other side of the world and whom he hadn't seen in decades. But it was the truth.

For the first time since his last day at the firm—no, for the first time since Dagebüll—he had the feeling that someone saw him. Not the praised-away engine, not the odd loner on the *Hallig*, but him. Kurt. The boy who'd buried the birds. The boy who'd run with Maren over the breakwaters until they lay laughing in the sand. Who'd carried her piggyback on the dike until the knee hurt. The only one who still remembered her child's face.

Kurt had answered Maren's letter with an email. He'd briefly and stiffly offered condolences and written about the *Hallig*. After that they only wrote electronically. It was faster, she said. And Kurt was glad of it. When typing he could think, delete, reformulate. When writing by hand he'd always had the feeling that you could see his uncertainty in every letter.

Maren's emails came irregularly. Sometimes three in a week, then nothing for two weeks. She wrote about Manhattan, about the Upper West Side, where she lived in an apartment with high ceilings and could see the trees in Riverside Park through the windows. She wrote about her partner Sarah, about Sarah's son who would go to college in the fall. She wrote about her work

at the MTA, about the subway tunnels under Manhattan, about the logistics that ensured millions of people got to work on time every day.

She wrote about "systems," about "structures," about "resilience."

One word especially kept appearing: resilience. She wrote how after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 entire tunnels had been flooded, pumps failed, power supply dead—and how the system had still recovered within days. *That's resilience*, she wrote. *When something breaks down and builds itself back up. When it becomes stronger through what it's been through.*

She wrote about colleagues who kept going after twenty-hour shifts. *Resilience*, she wrote, *isn't not falling down. It's getting back up.*

Kurt googled it once and read: *Strength, psychological resilience, ability to survive difficult life situations without lasting impairment.*

It sounded like American stuff. Like self-help books and therapy. Like the language of his young colleagues: "personal growth," "developing yourself," "working on yourself"—words that had already excluded him at the firm.

But sometimes, when she used the word, something else resonated. Something darker. As if she weren't just talking about subway systems, but about herself. As if there was something she didn't want to talk about. Or couldn't.

Kurt sensed it. He didn't know exactly what it was, but he sensed that there was a door that remained closed. A part of Maren's life to which he had no access.

And that irritated him.

He was the one who knew her from before. He was the one who'd stood with her in the mud, who'd buried the birds, who shared her childhood. Who still remembered her face when she was a child. But there were apparently things in her current life—important things—that she wasn't telling him.

He didn't ask. Partly because he didn't know how. Partly because he was afraid she'd close up completely then.

Kurt wrote about the lorry, about the *Hallig*, about the statics of things. He wrote about the moment when you knew a part fit because it clicked into place with a full, final sound. He wrote that out here the world still smelled like something, while cities only smelled of air conditioning and stagnation.

He noticed he was trying to romanticize his world to her. The *Hallig* wasn't beautiful. It was cold, wet, lonely. The lorry was old and stubborn. Momme barely spoke to him anymore. But Maren

remembered the North Sea, the mudflats, Dagebüll, and Kurt knew that this memory was idealized. She remembered summer and sun and the feeling of freedom. She didn't remember the November storms, the cold, the loneliness.

So he wrote to her about the *Hallig* as if it were a place of clarity. A place where a real, tough guy like him could be who he was. Where he didn't shy from the dirt, where he worked with his hands, where the statics were right. He wrote as if the *Hallig* were his home, not his exile.

Maren also wrote about the past. About Dagebüll, about the mudflats, about the dike crest. She remembered things Kurt had long forgotten: how they'd once walked out at low tide so far they could see the ferry to Föhr. How her brother had sat up on the dike reading a book while they dug for mussels in the mud below.

And she wrote about the bird cemetery. How she'd cried back then, and how he'd collected and buried the carcasses without hesitating. How he'd made crosses from tar and driftwood. She wrote it had been one of the few moments in her childhood when she'd felt protected.

Kurt read that and knew: she misunderstood it. Or maybe she understood it right, and he'd been lying to himself all these years.

You were sometimes mean, she wrote in another email. *But I don't think you knew how mean. You were just testing how far you could go.*

He read the sentence and felt caught out. But also understood. She knew who he was. She'd always known.

And she was still writing to him.

That was what mattered.

But with each email the fear grew too.

The fear that she'd suddenly stop writing. The fear that she'd realize he had nothing to offer. The fear that they led too different lives, that the shared past wasn't enough to bridge the gap between them.

The fear that she'd disappear again, like back then after the harbor shed.

He remembered that night as if it were yesterday. It had been after her graduation, shortly before she left for Berlin. They'd met in the harbor shed, where it smelled of diesel and old nets, the air thick with salt and expectation.

Maren had talked about Berlin, about the university, about the fear of the new. She'd cried, and he'd held her, and then it had happened.

For Maren it had been a goodbye. For Kurt it was a sealing. He believed that moment would bind her to him forever. He'd pressed his body into her memory like a stamp into soft wax. He'd been sure she'd come back, no matter how far the world pulled her away. He'd believed he could possess her if he just held her tight enough, if he just showed her what it was like to be touched by a real man. By someone who didn't shy from the dirt, who touched the carcasses, who dug the graves.

But she hadn't come back. She'd gone to Berlin, then to New York, and the contact had broken off as if a cable had been cut.

For decades he'd believed he'd possessed her that night. That she'd belonged to him, even if she didn't know it.

Only now was he beginning to understand: she'd never belonged to him. She'd given him a goodbye, and he'd made it into a conquest. He'd frightened her, not impressed her. He'd pushed her away, not bound her.

But maybe—maybe he could do it differently this time. Maybe he could hold her this time, not by grabbing, but through—through what? He didn't know.

All he knew was: he couldn't lose her again.

After three months the fear became unbearable.

He had to know if she was really there. If she meant it. If she'd endure.

So he tested her.

He wrote to her about September 11, 2001.

He knew it was wrong as he typed it. He knew it would hurt her. But he had to know. If she could endure even this, then she was really there. Then she wouldn't disappear again.

He tried to make it sound light. Almost like a joke. As if you could laugh about it too, if you just had the right distance. The distance he had, here on the *Hallig*, far from everything.

You know, Maren, he typed, *sometimes I think about the day the towers fell. I stood in the workshop in front of the TV and thought: finally something's happening. Finally gravity wins. All that New York pretension, those skyscrapers acting like physics doesn't exist—and then reality comes and takes what belongs to it. I was glad. Sounds harsh, I know. But sometimes you have to call things by their names. It wasn't a tragedy, it was a lesson. About statics. About what holds and what doesn't hold. The smooth facade always breaks eventually. That's just physics, you understand?*

He read it three times.

It was a joke. Of course it was a joke. A bit dark maybe, a bit hard. But that's what real humor was. Not that watered-down stuff everyone laughed at because they were afraid of offending someone. Real humor was when you told the truth and people didn't know whether to laugh or be shocked.

And at the same time it was more than a joke. It was an explanation. He was showing her how the world really worked. Physics. Statics. The things she'd forgotten in her New York glass world. He was the only one who could still tell her the truth. The only one who wasn't afraid to call things by their names.

If she understood that—if she laughed, or at least nodded, or said "You're right, Kurt, I never saw it that way"—then she really belonged to him. Then she hadn't forgotten the dirt. Then she was still the Maren from before, who'd stood with him in the mud, who'd admired him when he buried the dead birds.

And if not?

Then she'd just become one of them. One of the soft ones. One who couldn't handle the truth.

He pressed "Send."

Then he waited.

The telephone rang on a Thursday evening when Kurt had just come back from the lorry track. His knee burned as if glowing coals had been pressed into the joint, his shirt stuck to his back, and his fingers smelled of grease.

Already the evening before it had rung. Twice. He'd heard it as he sat in the kitchen, the shrill ringing cutting through the silence. Both times he hadn't picked up. He'd only stared at the beige push-button telephone sitting on the kitchen table, dusty and unused—his predecessor had probably only used his cell phone. He told himself he'd had things to do. The lorry. The knee. But the truth was: he was afraid. Afraid of her voice, of what she would say. Afraid she'd say exactly what he feared.

But he couldn't avoid it forever.

When it rang again that evening, he let it ring three times before he lifted the heavy receiver. Not because he didn't suspect who it was, but because he wanted to show her he had time. That he wasn't waiting for her. That he didn't depend on her.

He picked up. "Yes."

The connection crackled. A rushing sound, as if the signal first had to dive through a thousand tons of seawater. Then her voice, crystal clear.

"Kurt."

His name in her mouth. He'd forgotten how she pronounced it—not hard and short, as he was used to from himself, but drawn out, almost hesitant. *Kuurt*. As if his name itself were a question. Or an accusation.

He pressed the receiver tighter to his ear—the spiral cord tensed—and felt his heartbeat hammer in his temples.

"Maren."

"I read your email," she said. No greeting, no preliminaries. "About the towers. About your joy."

He grinned into the darkness of his kitchen. There it was. The test. Now she'd come with her New York morality, with her lectures about humanity and compassion, and he'd show her piece by piece how false it all was. He'd force her to face him. Really, with no escape route.

He wanted a real reaction. Anger, outrage, rejection—something real. Not this tired politeness, not this falling silent. If she could endure even this—his hardest truth, his worst face—and still stayed, if she fought back and didn't leave, then it was real. Then she really belonged to him. Then she hadn't forgotten the dirt.

And if she left? Then he'd at least been right. Then he wasn't the one abandoned, but the one who'd told the truth no one wanted to hear.

He sat down on the kitchen chair.

"Oh come on, Maren. I wasn't serious. It was a joke. Dark humor, you understand? Some people just can't handle it." He paused. "But surely you're still allowed to tell the truth. I mean, you know yourself how it works over there."

He leaned back, the chair leg creaked under his weight.

"Those skyscrapers, all that pretension. As if New York were the center of the world. As if the future were being made up there. But what's really being made there? People sit in glass palaces and push numbers around. Nobody touches anything anymore. Nobody makes anything real."

The silence on the other end was heavy, but he couldn't stop anymore. The words pushed out of him now, all the years of hurt, of exclusion, that had built up.

"You know what those towers were? They were the symbol. The symbol for everything that went wrong. For this whole damned new work world, where suddenly nobody knows who's in charge, where everyone sits in teams and is supposed to contribute ideas, where the ones with soft hands and iPads decide who's needed and who isn't." His voice got louder, faster. "They phased out people like me. Forty years I kept machines running, but suddenly that didn't count anymore. Because I didn't fit into their meetings. Because I didn't learn to pretend that work is a game where everyone's equal."

He was breathing hard now. The knee pulsed like a second, malicious clock.

"And then those towers come down, and everyone acts like it's a tragedy. But for whom? For the ones sitting up there who ruined the world? The ones who decided that people like me don't fit into their beautiful new world anymore?" He felt control slipping away, but he couldn't stop. "It wasn't a tragedy. It was physics. It was reality taking back what belongs to it. You can't talk gravity away in a meeting. It's just there. And it takes what belongs to it. Do you understand that?"

He waited for her contradiction. For the outrage. For the "How dare you" that he'd take apart like a rusted engine. Instead: silence. A silence so heavy he thought he could feel the pressure of the Atlantic in his ear.

"I was there, Kurt."

Three words. Said quietly, almost casually. But they hit him like a blow under the ribs.

"Of course you were there," he said quickly, too quickly. "In your fancy apartment on the Upper West Side. Watching from the window, right?"

"No."

Her voice didn't tremble with tears now. It trembled with a coldness he didn't know, that didn't fit his image of her, of soft Maren who'd cried over the dead birds.

"I was down there. I coordinated the evacuation of the tunnels for the MTA."

His hand grew damp. The receiver became heavy and slippery in his fist.

"I stood in that dust, Kurt. For weeks. I breathed that dust." Her voice remained flat, matter-of-fact, emotionless. "The dust of concrete, of files. Of people I knew. While you sit on your *Hallig* babbling about 'physics,' I breathed the dirt you only ever talk about."

No. No, that wasn't true. That couldn't be true.

She was twisting the facts. She had to be twisting them. Somehow. He didn't understand how, but she had to be. In his head Maren's world was clean and artificial, a world of glass and air

conditioning, where no one got their hands dirty. His world—the *Hallig*, the mud, the lorry—that was the realm of the dirty, the real. That was his territory. That was what made him who he was, what meant he was right, that he knew the truth.

But there she stood now claiming she'd—what? Breathed dust? People?

That made no sense. People didn't become dust. That was a lie. Or an exaggeration. Or she was twisting something, in a way he couldn't see through.

He felt resistance. He was used to resistance. Machines resisted, bolts stuck, parts didn't fit. And then you fought, and then you won, because you knew how it worked. This was resistance too. Maren was fighting back. She didn't want to admit he was right. So she bent reality until it fit her worldview.

But he wouldn't give in.

"You're putting on airs," he forced out. His knee pulled at every nerve now, as if invisible hands were tearing the joint apart. The words came hasty, disordered. "You're twisting the facts. You're making yourself important with your hero crap. In the end it was still just the collapse of a faulty construction. That doesn't change—"

"They were people, Kurt." Her voice became even flatter, even more matter-of-fact. "People who didn't just die peacefully in a bed like my brother."

The tightness of the kitchen pressed on him. The kitchen lamp hummed above his head like a horsefly. He wanted her to stop talking. He wanted her to scream at him, call him an asshole, accuse him of being a monster—something he could work with, something he could fight against.

But she gave him nothing. She just fell silent, on the other end of the line, with what she'd experienced, with the people she'd lost. Against that, everything he could have said was just empty talk. He only had his conviction about dirt, his truth about physics.

She had the original.

The panic rose in him like water in a breached hull.

What was he, if not the one who knew hardness? If not the one who endured the dirt? If she had that too—and more of it, and more real—what was left for him?

He felt control slipping away. The conversation wasn't going as it should. She was supposed to back down, and he was supposed to advance. She was supposed to justify herself, and he was supposed to be right. But she didn't back down. She just stood there. And he didn't understand how that could be.

"If you see it that way..." His voice sounded hoarse, brittle, strange in his own ears. "If you're coming at me with this line now and think you're twisting the truth here because you stood somewhere..."

He paused. He wanted her to beg him. He wanted her to say: "No, Kurt, I don't mean it like that." He wanted her to build the bridge he couldn't build because he didn't know how.

"Kurt?" Her voice sounded tired. Not angry. Not hurt. Just tired.

And that was the worst thing. The tiredness meant he'd already lost her. That she was already on her way to the door while he was still trying to control the conversation.

The fear exploded in him. The old, familiar fear from back then, when she went to Berlin and he stood on the dike and knew that the night in the harbor shed had sealed nothing, nothing at all. She would leave again. She was already gone. And he couldn't bear that she was leaving without him having determined it.

If he ended the conversation, he at least kept control. If he hung up, it was his decision. Then he wasn't being fired—he was quitting.

"Then forget it."

He pushed the words out like a projectile. Fast, hard, final.

"Then forget it," he repeated, and put the receiver back on the cradle.

The clack was hard, final. Plastic on plastic. But in his head it was a metallic, full sound. Like a part clicking into place. Like something that fits.

He sat there, his heart stumbling against his ribs, his hands trembling. He stared at the telephone, at the beige casing sitting silent on the table.

Any moment it would ring. Any moment she'd call back. Any moment she'd say: "Kurt, wait, I didn't mean it like that." Any moment she'd correct the mistake he'd just made.

He waited.

The telephone remained silent.

Outside the North Sea water gurgled against the *Warft*, an indifferent, wet sound. The kitchen lamp hummed. The joint in his leg felt as if it were rusting from the inside out.

He'd slammed the door and then complained that the room was dark.

But he only understood that much later.

The first weeks after the phone call Kurt still functioned. He got up when the *Hallig* was still dark, drank his coffee black and went to the lorry. The axles had to be greased, the linkage checked, the wheels freed of rust, the bolts tightened. It was good work, honest work, the kind of work where you didn't have to think.

But he thought.

He knelt in the cold sand beside the lorry, the leg protested with a dull, drilling pain, and his hands worked mechanically: apply grease, distribute it, wipe off the excess. At least the lorry responded. When you maintained it, it ran. There was a clear logic there, a statics you could rely on.

But after a few weeks he noticed he was skipping things. He greased the axles but didn't check the bolts. He wiped the wheels but didn't properly check the bearings. His head was elsewhere. On Maren's voice. On her tiredness. On the clack of the receiver on the cradle. People were different.

He thought about Maren's voice on the phone. That tiredness. That coldness. She hadn't called back. Weeks had passed, and the device stood dead on the table.

"She'll get in touch," he said aloud to the lorry's axles. "She has to."

There was no email.

Not the next week either.

Winter came hard. The *Hallig* transformed into a place of gray and black, the water stood high, the wind whistled through every crack. Kurt spent the days in the kitchen, the laptop in front of him, a blanket around his shoulders.

The memory of the phone call had changed. When he thought about it now, he saw it this way: he'd tried to talk to Maren. He'd explained his view to her, honestly and without embellishment. And her? She'd attacked him. She'd put on airs with her Ground Zero story, had tried to make him small, had declared his life experience worthless.

"Then forget it," he'd said. That had been an invitation. A demand to grow up, to decide: either you're ready for the truth, or you forget it.

She'd forgotten it.

She'd broken off contact.

It was no longer a question. It had simply been that way.

The laptop became a ritual.

Every morning, before coffee, he opened it. He had to adjust the power cable first until the charging light came on—the battery had been dead for months. The fan began to hum, loud and steady. The screen glowed yellowish in the dark kitchen, and his fingers typed the password on the worn keys. The "E" sometimes stuck. Open email. Load inbox. Nothing.

Every evening, after work, before the beer, again. Open. Log in. Load. Nothing.

"I'm not waiting," he said to the empty screen. "I'm just checking."

But it was a lie, and somewhere, deep down, he knew it.

He began neglecting the kitchen. Dishes piled up in the sink, the trash can overflowed, bottles collected on the floor. It didn't matter. He didn't care. The only thing that mattered was the blue glow of the laptop and the number next to "Inbox," which was never the right one.

Sometimes, late in the evening, when the beer had taken effect and the cold crept through the floorboards, he sat in front of the telephone and stared at the keys. He'd only have to dial the number. But she'd never given him her number. She'd called him, from her foreign number, but he couldn't call back. He didn't know the number.

But no.

She'd hung up. No, wait—he'd hung up. But only because she'd forced him to. With her tiredness. With her arrogance. With her "I was in the dust" talk.

He pushed the telephone aside.

In March, six months after the phone call, something happened with the pipe in the kitchen.

A sharp crack in the night, then the rush of water. Kurt stumbled out of bed, the knee sounded its alarms—a sharp, electric twitch that took his breath—and in the weak light of the flashlight he saw the disaster: a copper pipe, old and brittle, had given way, and cold water sprayed against the wall.

He cursed, turned off the main valve, but the damage was there. The pipe had to be replaced. Tomorrow. In daylight. He had spare parts, he had tools, he could do it himself.

Of course he could do it himself.

The next morning, after three hours of work on the cold kitchen floor, he knew he couldn't. The pipe sat so that he had to hold it with one hand and solder with the other, but he really needed three hands: one for holding, one for the soldering iron, one for the solder. Momme would have done it. Momme would have held the pipe while Kurt soldered, and it would have been done in ten minutes.

But he wouldn't ask Momme.

He improvised. He clamped the pipe with a vice that wasn't made for it, and soldered with trembling fingers. The solder joint was uneven, bumpy, a disgrace for a craftsman. But it held. For now.

He turned the water back on. It dripped in two places.

"Shit."

He sat on the wet floor, the leg stretched out, a numb pull in the joint.

Because of her silence.

For a moment he saw himself, putting down the receiver.

He drank two beers.

In early summer Kurt opened a new email window. His fingers hovered over the keyboard. The keys felt sticky under his fingers, hollow plastic that gave with each keystroke. The cursor blinked in the empty subject line.

He typed: "Maren,"

He stared at her name. His heart hammered against his ribs, an uneven, irregular beat.

He continued typing: "I don't understand why you're not"

He paused. No. That sounded like accusation. That sounded like weakness. He selected the sentence, pressed Delete.

New attempt: "Maybe we should"

Delete.

"I just wanted to say"

Delete.

His hands were trembling now. The laptop hummed softly, the kitchen lamp flickered.

No.

No.

SHE had broken off contact. SHE was the one who'd drifted into her cowardly silence. SHE had to get in touch.

He clicked "Delete draft." A dialog box appeared: "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he whispered and clicked. Five seconds until the draft disappeared. The fan got louder.

He closed the laptop and took a deep swig from the beer bottle. The beer was lukewarm and tasted of metal.

He did it two more times. In July. In October.

Each time he got further. Each time he wrote a whole paragraph, sometimes two. He explained, justified, implored. The words became more desperate, the sentences longer, more confused.

And each time, before he could press "Send," something held him back.

It wasn't pride. It was fear. The fear that she wouldn't answer. The fear that she would answer, but with coldness, with rejection, with a final "Leave me alone." The fear that he'd then really and finally prove what he already knew: that he'd lost her.

As long as he didn't write, as long as he waited, he could still tell himself it was her fault. That she was the coward. That he was the strong one who endured.

Delete. Delete.

In October he wrote again.

Maren, he typed. *I don't understand why you're not getting in touch. I explained my view to you, honestly and without embellishment. And then—nothing. You broke off contact. You're not answering anymore. If you don't want to talk anymore, at least say so.*

He read it three times. It sounded hard. But it was the truth. She hadn't gotten in touch. She'd let him down.

He pressed "Send."

Then he waited.

In early November, almost exactly a year after the phone call, the email came.

The tone tore him from a restless half-sleep. Ping. He sat up, grabbed the laptop, his heart stumbled.

There it was. Maren's name in the inbox. Bold. Unread.

He stared at it. His hands were damp.

For an hour he left the email unopened. The laptop grew warm on the table, the fan ran at full speed.

Then he drank a cold schnapps, rubbed his stiff knee and opened the email.

Kurt, you write that I broke off contact...

For four weeks he thought the same thing every day: tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll write.

Then the morning when he went to the lorry and saw it standing crooked. Not much, but noticeably. The front right wheel had run off track, the whole lorry tilted slightly to the side.

He cursed. The linkage must have jammed, the wheel wasn't running true. He had to get under the lorry to see what was wrong.

The damned joint crunched with every movement like sand between metal plates, but he ignored it. He'd endured worse.

He crawled under the lorry, the flashlight between his teeth, and inspected the axle. He searched for the problem—something must be blocking the wheel, jamming the linkage. He yanked at the wheel mount, tried to force it straight.

Then he saw it. The axle bolt. It was loose. Completely loose. The wheel was off track because the damned bolt had come loose. Five minutes with the wrench, and the lorry would be straight again.

He reached for the wrench lying beside him in the sand.

The knee screamed.

No, that wasn't right. The knee didn't scream. It gave way.

A sharp, tearing pain, as when something gives way that shouldn't give way. He felt his leg buckle under him, felt his whole weight shift, tried to brace himself, but it was too late.

His head struck the lorry's axle. Not hard enough to knock him unconscious, but hard enough that his field of vision collapsed for a moment.

When the world came back, he lay under the lorry, the leg at an angle that looked wrong, and the pain—the pain was no longer singing, no longer rhythmic. It was a single, white-hot scream.

"Shit," he whispered. "Shit, shit, shit."

He tried to move. The leg wouldn't obey. He tried to pull himself out from under the lorry with his arms. Every movement was fire.

After ten minutes he'd made it. He lay in the sand beside the lorry, gasping, his face wet with sweat and maybe tears too, and stared at the gray sky.

The knee was swollen. When he tried to move it, a pain went through him that took his breath away.

He had to get home. He had to—

He had to get help.

It took an hour to drag himself home. He pulled himself up on the lorry's railing, hopped on one leg, supported himself on everything he could find. The path to the kitchen door was maybe three hundred meters. It felt like kilometers.

When he finally made it to the kitchen, he let himself fall onto the chair and sat there, trembling, the knee now so swollen the pants were tight.

The telephone stood on the table. Momme's number—he'd written it down somewhere, on a slip of paper Momme had left him during one of the first visits. The slip still hung on the refrigerator, yellowed.

"Momme, I need help. The knee. Can you take me to the doctor?"

Thirteen words. No more. Five meters to the refrigerator. Read the number. Back to the telephone. Dial.

He stared at the beige casing. His hand trembled. He could get up. Get the slip. Dial.

Thirteen words.

"I can manage alone," he whispered.

He stayed sitting.

Three days later the knee was worse. The swelling remained, the pain too. He could barely stand anymore.

He sat in the kitchen, the laptop in front of him, Maren's email open.

I don't know if you'll answer. But I wanted to tell you: if you want to talk—about then, about now, about anything—I'm here.

He opened a new email. "Maren," he typed. Then: "I"

The display flickered briefly—the hinge was loose, the screen wobbled with every movement. His fingers froze over the keyboard.

On the table stood the telephone. Momme's number.

He had two things to do. Two simple things:

Call Momme: "I need help."

Write to Maren: "Yes. I want to keep talking."

Both meant the same thing: I need you. I can't do it alone.

But he couldn't write that. Not to Maren. Not to Momme.

He didn't want to admit he was lonely. That the *Hallig* was a prison, not a refuge. That he'd needed her—not to prove his superiority to her, but simply as a human being. As something bigger than his damned statics.

The knee throbbed like an idling engine running too hot.

If he called Momme, he had to admit he'd failed. That his whole philosophy of managing alone was a lie.

And if he admitted that, then he also had to admit to Maren that he'd been wrong.

It was the same. It was all the same.

His hand trembled. He stood up, limped to the refrigerator, tore off the slip. Stood at the telephone. His hand over the keys.

Then he put the slip down and sat back down.

He stared at "Maren," and "I" on the screen.

Then he closed the laptop.

"Tomorrow," he whispered. "Tomorrow."

But tomorrow wasn't better. And the day after that wasn't either.

The knee swelled further. The pain became unbearable—no longer localized, but a diffuse, all-encompassing pressure threatening to swallow the whole leg. He dragged himself to the toilet, to the refrigerator, back to the chair. No more. The kitchen stank now. Dishes piled in the sink, food remnants dried on the plates. Empty bottles lined the wall. There was no more beer.

Sometimes he opened the laptop and stared at Maren's email.

Sometimes he took the slip with Momme's number and laid it beside the telephone.

But he never pressed "Send." He never dialed the number.

"I can manage alone," he said to himself. But his voice sounded hollow.

After a week there was a knock at the door early in the morning.

Kurt lay in the twilight on his narrow bed, half asleep, half in the delirium of pain. The knee, propped on a pillow, throbbed in rhythm with his heartbeat. Outside it was still dark, but a pale, diffuse brightness was beginning to spread over the *Hallig*—a light that was neither day nor night, that bathed the world in grayscale and blurred the edges of things.

Then the loud knocking at the door. "Kurt? You there?" a voice called from outside.

Momme.

Kurt froze. He held his breath, as if he could make himself invisible.

"Kurt, I saw the lorry. It's been standing crooked on the track for days. Something wrong?"

Kurt didn't answer. He stared at the shadows on the ceiling and hoped Momme would interpret the silence as absence. Maybe Momme would just leave. But on the *Hallig* silence didn't mean absence; it meant distress.

Momme didn't leave. He pressed down the door handle—*Hallig* people didn't lock their doors—and entered.

The kitchen lay in semi-darkness. He saw Kurt on the rumpled bed in the next room. He saw the leg protruding from under the blanket like a foreign, misshapen branch.

"Jesus, Kurt."

Momme's voice wasn't reproachful. It was calm, almost matter-of-fact, carried by pragmatic concern. He stepped to the bed and pulled back the blanket. Then he switched on the bedside lamp.

In the yellowish light it was clear. The knee was blue-violet and taut with swelling, twice as thick as the other.

"How long's this been going on?"

"It's fine," Kurt croaked. His voice sounded rusted. "Tomorrow I'll be up again."

"You definitely won't. Needs a doctor. Right now." Momme stood, hands on his hips. "I'll take you over to the mainland."

"Can't," Kurt forced out. His voice sounded weak, even to his own ears. "The lorry's done for. No one's getting off here."

"The lorry." Momme snorted. "Think I don't know you've been messing with it for days? I've got my boat."

"The water—"

"Is low tide, yeah. Think I don't know that?" Momme pulled his smartphone from his jacket pocket and swiped across the screen. "I'll take you out to the deep channel in the boat. The cutter'll pick you up there."

"Momme, I—"

"Quiet." Momme raised a hand, the smartphone already at his ear. "Moin, it's Momme. *Hallig* Langeneß. Got an emergency here... Yeah, knee. Looks bad... Low tide, yeah, I'll take him out to the channel in my boat... Got it." He nodded a few times, grunted confirmation. "Yeah. Twenty minutes." Then he hung up.

He looked at Kurt. "The cutter can't come up to the lorry track. But they'll take you from out there. Come on now."

"I can make it to the jetty," Kurt claimed and tried to sit up.

But when he barely set his foot on the floor, the world exploded in white. He sank back, sweat shot instantly from his pores.

Momme didn't hesitate a second. "Stop that. We'll do it differently."

"I don't need—"

"Yes, you do."

Momme stripped off his yellow PVC jacket and laid it wordlessly over a chair. Then he helped Kurt up, turned his back to him and crouched. The massive breadth of his shoulders filled Kurt's field of vision.

"Arms around my neck, Kurt. Hold on."

Kurt hesitated. The humiliation was physically palpable, a burning in his chest. You carried children this way. Not men. Not the elder. But his leg left him no choice.

With a deep exhale Momme hoisted him up. He was tall and strong, strong enough to carry Kurt's weight. Kurt—a grown man with the residual muscle of a mechanic—was no light burden. Momme felt it. He searched for the center of gravity, reached with his large, chapped hands under Kurt's thighs and adjusted until Kurt sat stable on his hips.

Kurt wrapped his arms around Momme's shoulders and torso, avoiding the neck, and dug his hands into the thick knit of the sweater. His face fell involuntarily forward until his forehead and nose not only touched the sweater but sank completely into it. The sweater smelled of sheep's wool, of cold salt, of the cheap tobacco that clung to the fibers.

The march through the uneven *Hallig* grass was an ordeal of closeness and movement. The fabric of Kurt's work jacket—stiff and rough through the years—caught on Momme's wool sweater like velcro. For this one kilometer they were coupled together.

With each step Kurt felt the warmth in Momme's neck. Momme's breath came in bursts, heavy from exertion. Through the load and the work he began to sweat under the sweater. The smell changed—no longer just wool and salt, but heat, sweat, labor. In the cold November air steam rose from Momme's shoulders, directly into Kurt's face. Kurt breathed it in. A humiliating, liberating intimacy—he had no choice, no control, only the being carried.

The marsh was soft now in November. With each step the mud sucked at Momme's rubber boots. *Schlubp. Schlubp. Schlubp.* The only rhythm in the silence of the dim morning.

Kurt, who didn't move, felt the cold creep through his pants into the injured knee. The pain became numb, which was almost more frightening than the stabbing. The joint felt as if it were melting away.

The warmth from Momme's hands penetrated through his pants. Not much, but noticeable—body warmth, work warmth. The grip was firm, the strength in it constant. With each step Kurt felt: these hands would not let him fall.

Being held. So this was what it felt like.

He hated the helplessness. He was ashamed. But beneath the hate and shame lay a deep, almost painful relief. He no longer had to hold. He was being held. The steadiness of Momme's steps was the only thing between him and the abyss of pain.

He turned his head over Momme's shoulder. In the diffuse dawn that bathed the *Hallig* in an eerie, milky light, he recognized the lorry. It stood crooked on the track, the front wheel off line.

From here he could see it. So obvious. The axle bolt. It had loosened over weeks, the wheel had gradually come out of alignment. Kurt hadn't noticed. He'd greased the axles, cleaned the wheels, but never checked the bolts. A mistake a mechanic with forty years' experience should never make. That Kurt would never have made—before.

But he'd been distracted. By his thinking about Maren. By waiting for her sign of life. By the silence.

His fault. His mistake.

They reached the edge of the *Koog*. The mudflats lay wide and silvery-gray in the twilight, the ebb had pulled the water almost completely back. Momme's motorboat lay heavy in the mud, a few meters from the saving channel.

Carefully Momme let him slide into the boat at the stern. Kurt sank onto the thwarts, the leg rigid and trembling in front of him. The boat still lay heavy in the mud, a short distance from the saving channel.

Momme secured him with a few fender cushions—makeshift, but stable enough. Sweat ran down his back, soaked the sweater. Wordlessly he jumped out of the boat again and walked calmly and controlled, as if he had all the time in the world, the 150 meters to his house. His steady gait irritated Kurt even more than haste would have.

Kurt watched him go and didn't understand what was happening.

Momme's body warmth was suddenly gone. In its place the November cold pressed into his limbs—his arms, his chest, the injured knee. Kurt lay alone in the boat. He didn't understand. Why had Momme left him here? Where had he gone?

The longing came without warning. For Momme's shoulders under his face. For the warm hands under his thighs. For being carried.

He waited.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he felt the boat begin to move. The tide was coming in. The stern lifted from the mud, then the bow. The boat rocked now, gently at first, then more noticeably. Kurt was secured, but he couldn't stir, couldn't intervene. He was at the mercy of the

movement, the rhythm of the water, the elements. With each wave the knee rolled to the side, pulled at the ligaments, with the thrusts of the water the pain reached him anew.

His whole life he'd searched for statics. For things that held. That fit. That clicked into place with a full, final sound. Here nothing held. Here nothing fit. Here there was only movement.

He waited. How long had Momme been gone? A minute? Five?

Finally he saw Momme coming back. Over the damp wool sweater he'd pulled an old oilskin jacket to keep the warmth in. Through the additional layer of clothing he looked even more massive than before. In his hand he carried a scratchy horse blanket.

Kurt was relieved. He understood now why Momme had run to the house.

Momme waded through the shallow water to the boat and climbed in. He began wordlessly to wrap Kurt in the blanket. He laid it first over Kurt's chest, then around his shoulders, stuffed the edges under his sides, as if he were wrapping a package. His large hands were surprisingly gentle in this. He pulled the blanket taut, checked with a brief touch whether Kurt was warm enough, then nodded, satisfied with his work.

Kurt couldn't move. His arms were pinned, his body wrapped like a newborn. It was humiliating—he was the elder, the one with more years, and was being cared for like someone who couldn't help himself. But at the same time there was something else. A warmth that didn't come only from the blanket. The feeling that someone was caring for him, without questions, without reproach.

Momme straightened up. He reached into the pocket of his oilskin jacket and pulled out a crumpled packet of tobacco. His fingers rolled a cigarette routinely. He lit it, took a deep drag.

Kurt stared at him. The cigarette. Momme had gone to the house—for cigarettes?

The smoke drifted toward him. Cheap, harsh. Kurt turned his head away.

A quick grab at the starter cord, an angry yank. The motor coughed, spat a cloud of blue haze and settled into a steady, reassuring rumble. Momme gripped the tiller. He turned the boat into the dark channel, there where in the distance the bluish gleam of the sea rescue cutter already cut the horizon.

Kurt stared back at the shrinking silhouette of the *Hallig* vanishing in the gray of the sea. He felt the vibration of the deck beneath him. The afterglow of Momme's body warmth on his face was already fading.

He'd been carried. Piggyback. Like a child. He'd been wrapped in a horse blanket. He'd waited for Momme like for his mother.

The shame burned hotter than the knee.

Whether he'd ever call Maren, he didn't know. Probably not. What should he tell her anyway? That he'd lain in the dirt? That he hadn't managed alone? That he'd had to be rescued?

He looked over at Momme, who stared unshakably into the wind, the cigarette between his lips. In the distance the cutter came closer.

"Momme."

Momme turned his head.

"Thanks."

Momme nodded. Slowly. Once. Then turned back to the tiller.

Kurt let the tension fall from his shoulders. Not because he'd understood anything. But because he was too exhausted to hold it any longer.

From Which He Had Bidden Her to Rise

1

Early autumn 2061, a Tuesday or Wednesday

I was sitting at the kitchen table where I always sit, and reading. The book was one of the last of its kind, printed on film like the newer ones, but the language in it still the old language — not the boldest I had known, the one that had had no fear at all, but the old language. It had been lying there for weeks, open, because I fell asleep in the evenings before I had finished, and in the mornings read on from where I had stopped. I read more slowly than before. That is not a complaint.

The morning was still. Not the stillness I had known as a child, when everyone was asleep and the city briefly collected itself — a different one. The birds. The wind, sometimes. Otherwise nothing.

Zefir did not knock. They came through the door, which I left open when I was not expecting anyone — I heard them first, a soft, even humming that stopped with their footsteps. Zefir always carried something when they came, and never asked whether one wanted it. I pushed my book aside. Zefir laid something on the table and stepped back — not waiting, but finished, as though the object now belonged to me and their own role was thereby concluded.

I smelled it before I looked.

Paper from a particular time — not the smooth, cold pages that smell of nothing, but the other kind, the kind that has substance. There had been a way of printing, a combination of ink and aged paper, that I cannot describe. Something that recalled summer, resin and dry grass — and beneath it something bitter, austere, that held the summer at a distance again. I knew this smell from some of the books my mother had left behind.

Zefir said: Got it somewhere. Don't know what it is.

I took the book in my hand.

It was heavy. Not unusually heavy, but heavy for the world we live in, in which books have become rare, not because they were forbidden, but because no one any longer knows what they are for. The binding was dark, slightly worn at the edges, with the impression of many hands that had held it. I opened it.

The type was small and dense, the paper slightly yellowed, the pages still firm. I read a sentence. Then another. The language was the language I had learned as a child, taught as a teacher of German, and in the decades since my retirement quietly continued to read — the language of the books I still possess, which I know, and which therefore no longer surprise me. Complex, layered, a sentence that contained another, that contained a third. A subordinate clause carrying a further one, without the weight becoming too much. I looked at the title page.

Heinrich von Kleist. Michael Kohlhaas.

I knew the name. Not well — I still had a book of his somewhere on the shelves, an edition of the Hermannsschlacht that had belonged to my mother and that I had never read, because historical drama had always been remote from me. It had survived only because it had been printed on good paper, with good ink — while most of what my mother had left behind had over the decades become illegible or fallen apart — the film pages grown brittle, the ink flaking off, book by book, until I had stopped checking and simply thrown away what could no longer be held together.

Zefir was still there.

I said what the book was. Not who Heinrich von Kleist was. The book itself, what it was, from what time it came, whose language it contained, that it was still legible. I said what it might be worth, in the sense in which Zefir understood worth.

Zefir listened. Then: Good.

I leafed through the book once more. As I did, something fell out — a folded piece of paper that had been lying between two pages, perhaps as a bookmark, or forgotten, or deliberately left there. I picked it up and unfolded it.

A printout in the format of a platform entry, with a header that I took at first for a letterhead, but letters are not printed in white text on a black ground. I read the header: Reading Platform Nordbund | Short Texts | Classics Archive. Below it a date: 14 March 2052. Below that a category, a language, a rating. Below that a title.

The Beggar Woman of Locarno. By Heinrich von Kleist.

I stopped.

I had just read Kleist's name on the title page of the book. But the title — The Beggar Woman of Locarno — that I knew from somewhere else. Not from a book I had read. From a table of contents. I had been young, perhaps twelve or thirteen, and had been leafing through my mother's books, a collected volume of novellas, and had seen the title in a list, between other titles, without reading more than the line. The Beggar Woman of Locarno. The title had lodged itself, without my being able to say why. Perhaps it was the word Bettelweib, the strangest of those four words. The book itself was later gone, or I had not found it again, or I had not searched further.

I read the platform entry.

The description began with a number: twenty minutes' reading time, many older sentence constructions. Status: archived. Not recommended for active use. Reason: linguistic accessibility not guaranteed.

This language I knew. I had read it in other contexts, in other years, and knew what it meant and what it did not say. I read on.

Then came the summary.

A large building. Spacious. Many rooms.

Each sentence stood alone. Subject, predicate, sometimes not even that. *A woman enters the building. She is poor. She is sick. She has a crutch. The owner allows her to rest in a room. She lies on the floor. Then the owner returns. He is displeased. He orders her to rise.*

I stopped reading.

I sat still. Somewhere, in a place I could not name, something had given way — it had not broken, had only given way, as a floor gives way when one stands on a spot that has not been trodden for a long time. I did not know where this spot was. I only knew that the sentence had found it.

Then reason returned, and with it the other thing: the Kleist book lying before me. The language I had just been reading — the sentences that carried others, the weight that was no weight because the construction held it — and now this. *Then the owner returns. He is displeased. He orders her to rise.*

At the end of the summary it said: *What happens then? That is in the text.*

I laid the paper on the table.

Zefir had gone. Outside, somewhere, I could still hear a humming receding.

The power had not yet come on at this hour. Through the window fell light, the early autumn light, that came slanting through the panes and laid a long strip on the floor. The book lay beside the paper. I left both where they were.

Outside it was still again.

2

Three weeks later

The doorbell rang.

I was not accustomed to anyone ringing the bell. Most of those who came, came like Zefir — through the open door, with a brief call or without one. The ringing sounded unpracticed, as though someone was not sure whether the bell still worked, and had therefore pressed it twice, too briefly, with a pause between.

I opened the door.

A man, perhaps thirty, perhaps a little older. Slight, with the kind of attentiveness in his face that one sees in people who read more than they speak. He held a few sheets of paper in his hand — paper that had not been intended for this purpose, the backs of something else, closely written in a hand that I recognized at once as labored. Not the laboredness of a poor writer, but as though someone had copied something they had not fully understood.

He asked whether I was Mentor Lirika. I said yes.

Then he said he had heard that I could read such texts. He said it without circumlocution, without the apology that most people send ahead of them when they want something they consider unusual. Not: whether I might perhaps have the time, whether it was too much to ask — but: he had heard that I could, and that was why he was here.

I liked that.

He said his name. Fen.

I let him in.

He sat down at the kitchen table, in the place where Zefir always stands and never sits, and laid the sheets before him. I sat down across from him. He pushed the sheets towards me without saying anything.

I looked at the handwriting first.

It was, as I had immediately guessed, Fen's handwriting. It was slow — one could see it in the even pressure, in the places where he had lifted his pen to think further or to decipher what he was in the process of copying. In some places words were missing, replaced by a gap or by a question mark in parentheses. In one place he had omitted an entire sentence and noted in the margin: too long, illegible. That stood there like a diagnosis — plain, without apology, without any attempt to conceal his own limit. The gaps were not his failure. They had a different form — the form of something that could no longer be held, regardless of how slowly one wrote.

Then I read.

It was a letter. Nothing that had come from a book, no document — a letter, from one person to another, without a date, with a salutation containing a first name I did not know and a signature I could not decipher because Fen had not deciphered it. The sender was unknown. The recipient was unknown. What remained was the text.

The language was the language of a person accustomed to writing letters — not the language of the electronic communications I still remembered from my time, brief and purposeful, but the older kind, in which a letter was still a place where one thought while writing. The sentences were long. Not long like some sentences, not with the architectural intention I had sensed in the book Zefir had brought — but long in the way that educated people wrote when they had time and wanted to explain something to someone that could not be explained in a short sentence.

One sentence began with a condition, carried the condition further in a relative clause, then opened a second subordinate clause describing the consequence, and closed with a main clause that qualified the consequence. Four levels. Not a word too many. I read it twice.

At the place Fen had not copied — the one too long, illegible — I stopped.

I asked: Do you still have the original?

He said: No. It is in the archive. I was not allowed to take it.

I said what kind of text it was. Not who had written it — that I did not know. But what it was: a letter from the twenties or thirties of the century, from someone with a particular education, to someone he trusted, about something I only partially understood because the gaps were too large. I said that the language was good. Not masterly — good. The language of a person who could write without having made it their profession.

Fen listened. Not in the way in which someone waits until one has finished — he listened the way one listens to something one could not have said oneself but recognizes immediately upon hearing it. I knew this kind of listening. It had become rare.

Then I asked: Where did you find it?

He described the archive — the municipal archive, the holdings, the boxes that no one opened any more because no one knew any longer what was in them, and because what was in them interested no one who could not read what was written there. He had found the letter in a bundle, together with other papers he could not read. He had copied it because he wanted to know what kind of text it was. With documents like these, he said, the archive recorded as a matter of course: author unknown. Date of origin unknown. Whether human or machine: unknown. He said it the way one quotes a catalogue note one has read a hundred times.

I heard it. I said nothing.

I asked: Is there more of this?

He said: Yes. I think so.

I took the platform entry, which was still lying on the kitchen table, and laid it beside Fen's transcription. The transcription: ink on white paper, the back of something that had no longer been needed. The platform entry: white text on a black ground. The same image, once inverted — for a moment, before reason caught up with what the eyes saw, it could have been positive and negative.

Fen read the platform entry. Slowly, with the brief pauses that showed where he needed to think. Then he read it again.

I waited.

He said: That is a summary.

I said: Yes.

He said: Of a text that exists.

I said: That existed. Perhaps still exists.

He looked at me. Then he looked back at the platform entry. At the summary that stood in individual sentences, each one alone, without connection, without the weight that the text it described must have had, judging by the language of the letter now lying beside it.

He said nothing. Nor did I. The power had come on by now — I heard the soft hum of the refrigerator that always came when it started up. Outside it had grown lighter.

After a while Fen asked: What would one need for that?

I sat with the question a while before answering. In the years when I had been teaching, this question — what would one need for that — had been the question on which everything

depended. Not: can one do it, is one permitted, is it worth it. But: what does one need. A question that already knows there is a way, and only wants to know where it begins.

Then I said: I don't know. I don't even know yet how the question goes.

3

November 2061

Zefir came one morning when the power had come on earlier than usual, and laid something on the table that I took at first for a stone.

It was small, darker than glass and yet glass, with a depth that the light did not explain. I took it in my hand. It weighed little. In the light that fell slanting through the window, something seemed to stand within it — not a pattern, only the suggestion of a structure, even down into the depth, like something that had not grown but been made.

Zefir stood at the table and looked at the glass in my hand, with a posture I knew — the posture of someone who wants to be rid of something and at the same time is not sure whether it is permitted.

But I did not ask where it had come from. Something in Zefir's posture gave way — the shoulders, the breath, both at once — and then the glass lay on the table.

Reyansh came that morning at his usual time. He set his bag on the chair, took out the medications — the small pinkish-red tablets first, then the others — and filled the weekly box, Monday through Sunday, morning and evening, without haste and without fuss. He did it with the same precision with which, as I had by now come to know, he had formerly done other things — things that no longer existed, or that still existed, but not for him. The box was his code. That was not sad. It was the form in which some people transfer what they are capable of into what is needed. I saw it, and I left it alone, because words would have been the one thing that would have helped even less than silence.

Then Reyansh saw the glass on the table.

He looked at Zefir. Zefir looked at the floor.

Reyansh picked up the glass without saying anything and held it against the light. He turned it slowly, examined the pattern within, which lit up in the light — even, without axis, without centre, not the pattern of a crystal but of a process. His eyes changed, barely perceptibly, in the

way I knew from him when he recognized something he had not expected. He did not say so. He asked for the microscope.

Zefir hummed something, briefly — not the usual melody, but something else, flatter, that stopped again at once. I registered it. I did not ask.

The microscope had stood for years on the shelf beside the door, between books and things that had fallen to me or that I could not throw away. It had been my father's — a biology teacher, as I had been a German teacher, only a generation earlier, in a world where one still knew what one had to pass on and to whom and why. Now it belonged to me, because it stood in the villa and I lived in the villa.

I fetched it. Reyansh looked at it, turned it over, looked at an attachment I had never used and whose function I did not know. He said: Polarizing filter. Then he set the microscope on the table. Then he pressed something on the side of the microscope, a faint light appeared. He laid the glass beneath it, looked through the eyepiece. What he saw, he did not say. He looked through the eyepiece for a long time.

The next morning he came with the laptop.

What he did in the following hours I understood only as a sequence of actions whose connection remained opaque to me. He directed the microscope at the glass, adjusted something on the attachment — small turns that he measured, not estimated — and typed numbers into the laptop, rows of numbers that I could see from the table without reading them. The pattern in the glass, which I had taken for chance, seemed under the microscope to be something else — not chance, but arrangement, layer upon layer, as though someone had written a great deal very small and had known in doing so that it could only be read that way.

Fen sat nearby and watched. Zefir had not come that day.

The first attempt yielded nothing. Reyansh stood up, went to the kitchen, washed his hands — not because they were dirty, but because he needed something he could do without thinking — and came back. He changed something in the settings, typed new numbers. Fen wrote alongside. I sat at the table and watched the two of them work. What was happening here was Reyansh's domain, not mine.

Towards evening, while the power was still on, the screen began to show something that Reyansh called a transmission. He said it briefly, without explanation, as though speaking to himself. He stayed as long as the power was on. The next morning he came again.

When I woke, he was sitting before the laptop. The cursor was blinking. Reyansh typed a line, waited. Then there appeared on the screen, before any answer came, an identifier — text that the model wrote of its own accord, small and even.

Reyansh leaned back. He said, without turning round: *NUCLEUS. Version 2.1.* He was silent for a moment. Then: I would not have expected that.

I did not know what it meant. I wrote the name down.

Fen stood behind Reyansh and looked at the screen. The cursor waited.

I saw at first only that it was there.

The platform entry was the first thing we entered.

Reyansh typed it out, his head slightly inclined. Then he asked Fen what he should enter — not the content, but the instruction. Fen thought for a moment. He said: *Tell the story. In complete sentences. With subordinate clauses.* He hesitated, then added: *Don't explain. Show.* Reyansh typed it as Fen had said it, without comment. The cursor disappeared. We waited.

The tool took longer than Reyansh had expected. He did not say so, but I could see it in the way he looked at the screen — not impatient, more weighing, as though he were calculating something he did not say aloud. Fen leaned against the wall. Outside it was still. The refrigerator hummed.

Then text appeared.

Fen leaned forward. Reyansh leaned back. A brief smile that he had not made for anyone — it was simply there, for a moment, then gone again. I stayed sitting where I was.

Fen read first. He read quickly, then more slowly, then stood up and took a step back, as though he needed distance to see what he had read.

Reyansh read next. He read without visible reaction, his eyes moving line by line, evenly, without pausing.

Then Fen pushed the laptop towards me.

I read.

After the first sentence I knew that something was wrong. Not what — that I did not yet know. Only that. I read on, slowly, and tried to hear where it lay. *The building was large and spacious. The woman was poor and sick. The owner was a man of standing who set store by order.* Each sentence stood alone. Then, at one point: *She obeyed, although it was difficult for her, for she*

had learned throughout her life to follow the instructions of those who had power over her. I stopped. That was it, or part of it. But the rest was it too, in a way I could not yet name.

I looked away from the laptop.

Fen asked: What do you think?

I said: Wait.

I read again. The sentences lined up beside one another like objects that someone had arranged in a row because they did not know how to fit them together. The building. The woman. The owner. The action. Everything was there. And yet something was wrong — not in one sentence, not in one place, but everywhere, evenly, like a translation in which every individual word is right and the sentence is not.

I said: It feels wrong. I don't yet know exactly where.

Fen waited.

I said: It wants to help me. Too much. It explains something that it should have shown — but that is not all. It is also the language itself. The sentences.

Fen looked at the screen. He said: They are too short.

I said: Yes. But that is not all of it.

We sat for a while without anyone speaking.

Reyansh had said nothing during this time. Now he typed something, looked at the screen, typed something more. Then he said, without looking up: The model used the entry as a template. It imitated what it received.

I understood what he meant. We had given the tool the platform entry — the summary, the sentences that stood alone — and the tool had answered in that language. It had received what we gave it and made of it what it could. That was not wrong. It was simply not what we wanted.

Fen said: We need to give it something else.

I said: Yes.

Zefir came today — I am writing this afterwards, because it only occurs to me now. They stood briefly in the doorway while Fen and Reyansh were still there, looked at the laptop, looked at us. I was just reading something aloud — a sentence from the platform entry, to show what I meant. Zefir listened. Not in the way one listens when one is waiting for one's own turn to speak. A different posture, barely perceptible, as though someone had pulled on a thread. Then:

no humming. They left again. I do not know why I am writing this down. It seemed important, in that moment.

Outside it had grown darker by now. The power would be on for another hour, perhaps two.

4

Spring 2062

Fen came on a Tuesday — I have stopped counting the days since I no longer teach, and only begin counting them again when something specific is expected on a specific day. He laid the book on the table, beside the laptop that had been standing there for some weeks in the place where the Kohlhaas had lain in the autumn.

It was a reference work. Large, heavy, the format of a book one does not pick up but opens where it lies. *Kindlers Literaturlexikon*, volume 9. Fen had found it in the archive basement, in a box with other reference works that no one had opened since reference works had ceased to be used.

He turned to the page, which he had marked with a slip of paper. I read.

The entry was brief — two pages, a bare dozen paragraphs, written by someone named Ines Gebordini, in the language in which encyclopaedia articles are written: precise, dry, entirely without any attempt to please. The sentences were long, but not in the way that interested me — long in the manner of academic discourse, which says everything and shows nothing, which uses subordination as a tool of qualification rather than a tool of narration. I read it twice nonetheless. The content was what I needed: the plot, complete, with the dog episode, with the fire, with the final sentence about the bones.

I read the final sentence once more.

Fen waited.

I said: That is good. Enter it.

Reyansh typed out the entry, his head slightly inclined. Then he asked Fen what he should enter — not the content, but the instruction. Fen thought for a moment. He said finally: Tell the story. In complete sentences. With subordinate clauses. Don't explain. Show. Reyansh typed it without comment. The cursor disappeared. We waited.

The output was longer than the first. That was the first thing I noticed — not the quality, but the volume. The Kindler entry had been taken up in full: the beggar woman, the marchese, the

knight, the dog, the fire, the bones. What beyond that was missing or not missing, I did not know. I read it aloud.

By the second paragraph I could hear that something was better. The sentences were longer — not the short, clipped sentences of the first output, but sentences with relative clauses, with causal structures, with a subordination that the tool had learned from the Kindler entry. It had taken over the syntax of the encyclopaedia article and applied it to the narrative. Compared with the first attempt this was considerable: the first output had imitated the language of the platform entry, paratactic, each sentence alone. This one had understood that sentences can carry one another.

And yet.

I pushed the laptop away from me. I knew something was wrong, but I did not immediately know what. Not the same wrongness as the first time — this was not poor, not helpless. It was something else, something I would have to carry with me for a while before I knew what it was.

Fen looked at me. Reyansh looked at the screen. No one said anything.

I looked at the screen again and read once more, this time slowly, sentence by sentence. *The castle was old. The walls were cold. The light fell sparingly through the tall windows.* I stopped. That was it, or part of it — not the syntax, which was better now, but what the syntax was being used for. The sentences explained where one was before they began to narrate. They brought the reader into the picture, carefully, step by step, as though they did not trust him to arrive there on his own. The Kindler entry had done the same thing — the tool had not learned the narrative but the language of the entry that had been written about the narrative.

I said: It is better. But it has learned the wrong thing.

Fen asked: What do you mean?

I said: The syntax comes from the entry, not from the text. The tool has learned how the entry narrates — academic, qualifying, explaining every step. That is not Kleist's language. Kleist would not explain where one is. One is simply there.

The tool had not failed. It had learned what the world had shown it — and what the world had shown it was the simplified language of a summary written for people who could no longer read the text. That was not the tool's failing. It was the imprint of something larger than all of us.

Fen listened. Then he said: The last sentence.

I said: What about it?

He said: It is close. Not right, but close. *He was buried in that corner of the room from which he had ordered the woman to rise.* That sounds almost like — he paused. Like what it is supposed to be.

I looked at the last sentence of the output. He was right. The closing sentence was the best sentence of the entire text — not because the tool had invented it, but because the Kindler entry had given it the content of the closing sentence, and the tool had made of it something that came close. Not the tool's achievement. The document's achievement.

I let this stand for a while. Then I said: Then we need better documents.

That was the first sentence that felt like something with a direction. Not a judgment, not a result — a direction. Fen noted something down. Reyansh closed one file and opened another. I stood up and put water on, as I always do when something has been decided that I do not yet fully understand.

Zefir did not come today. I only noticed when I began to write this.

What will not let me go, while I write this, is an image that has nothing to do with the tool. A student reading a sentence aloud and pausing — not because they cannot read on, but because they have heard something they cannot yet place. In such moments I had always waited. Not explained, not helped further — waited, because I knew that the placing belonged to them, not to me. Leave the weight with the student, not with the teacher. That was one of the most important things I had learned in all those years.

The tool does not wait. It comes to meet one. It does not trust the reader, and so it explains what it should have shown. That is not its fault. It has learned what it was given.

5

Summer 2062

Zefir brought the books in a crate that they had transported on the bicycle, tied crosswise over the handlebars with a cord not intended for this purpose. I heard them already from the street — a soft, even humming that stopped with the creaking of the gate and resumed when they came through the door. They set the crate on the floor beside the kitchen table, glanced up briefly, went on humming, and then stood there as they always stood when they had brought something they could not place.

Fen knelt down and looked inside.

Most of the books in the crate were things that had been left behind, not because they had been valuable, but simply because they had not been thrown away, which is not the same thing. A dictionary. An edition of the Civil Code, dated 1987. Two volumes of an encyclopaedia, the third missing. Then, beneath the others, a slimmer volume, bound in pale linen, spine facing up: *Kleist-Archiv Sembdner, Heilbronner Kleist-Studien*, volume 14.

Fen held it in his hand and looked at it without opening it.

He said: That is a collected volume. Academic. He hesitated. Literary-academic.

I asked: What is in it?

He opened the table of contents, read quietly, then louder: *Syntactic Architecture and Protocolar Tone. Kleist's Prose Style as Exemplified by 'The Beggar Woman of Locarno'.*

The room was still for a moment.

Reyansh, who had been sitting at the laptop and making notes, put down his pen. Zefir looked from Fen to me — the humming had stopped.

Fen gave me the book.

I opened the chapter. The language was not Kleist's language — that was to be expected, and it bothered me less than the Kindler entry had, because by now I knew what I was looking for. What gave me pause for a moment was the irony: a text about *lapidarität*, written in the language that qualifies everything, explains everything, leaves nothing to the reader. Kleist would have said the same thought in one sentence and moved on. But the subject was the right one, and that was enough.

I read the first passage aloud, slowly, as I always read aloud — with the breath that forty years of teaching had left behind:

Whoever wishes to describe Kleist's prose style finds themselves confronted with a paradox that appears with comparable sharpness in no other author of German literature: the sentence is complex, but the tone is spare.

I paused. Then I read on:

Kleist deploys the full energy of the German periodic sentence to say things that seem not to correspond to their syntactic framing — and it is precisely from this discrepancy between the elaborateness of the form and the lapidarität *of the content that the specific tension of his prose arises.*

I laid the book on the table. My right hand lay beside it, and I noticed how the fingers moved slightly without my willing it — a trembling that came and went and that I knew by now. I laid the hand in my lap.

Reyansh had been listening without looking up — and now, as I had stopped reading, he looked up. He said: What does that mean — *lapidarität*?

I said: That little is said. That what is said is no more than needs to be said.

He nodded, slowly, in a way that showed he recognized this — not the word, but the thing.

Zefir was still at the table. The humming had started up again, softer than before, almost inaudible. I saw how their posture had changed during the reading — not barely perceptibly, but truly changed, the shoulders different, the head slightly inclined, as though something in them had come to rest that was otherwise in motion. The thread someone had pulled on was real. I saw it, and I said nothing.

Fen had been reading along during the reading aloud. Now he took the volume in his hand and leafed through it. He said: It also says which other texts one needs. Five. He listed them: The Earthquake in Chile, The Foundling, The Marquise of O…, Saint Cecilia, Michael Kohlhaas.

I said: We have the Kohlhaas.

Fen said: Yes.

We looked at one another — both with the same thought. It was too early to be sure whether it was right.

Reyansh asked: Can we enter that? He pointed to the volume that Fen was still holding open in his hand.

Fen looked at the pages — the text was dense, double-columned, with footnotes, in a typeface one could not read for long without losing one's place. He said: I'll start.

I said: We'll take turns.

He looked at me. I looked at the laptop. He said nothing more.

Zefir left shortly afterwards — I heard the humming through the open door until it had faded.

The typing took four evenings. Fen typed when he was there and the power was on, with the book beside the laptop, his head between the two, his eyes alternating between the page and the screen. He typed more slowly than I — not because his fingers were slower, but because at every second sentence he paused, read back, read on, as though he needed to verify whether

he had understood what he had just given to the tool. Sometimes I saw him type a sentence twice, delete the first, leave the second.

I typed on the evenings when Fen was not there, and sometimes also when he was there and I had the book in my hand and did not want to wait. The typing came back more quickly than I had expected — not as before, but well enough. The fingers still knew where the letters were. The trembling that troubled me in quiet moments stopped as soon as the hands were working. That was no comfort, but it was something.

At one place, on page 68, a piece of the page had broken away — moisture, at some point, the paper grown brittle and torn. Half a paragraph was missing. On the reverse side footnotes, but those we did not need.

Fen typed three em-dashes at the gap and continued. I saw it later and left it as it was.

At the end of the fourth evening Fen closed the laptop and said: It's in. The stylistics chapter. As well as we could.

Reyansh, who had stopped by once more that evening, opened the laptop again, read through the text, nodded once. Then he asked Fen about the prompt — what the tool should know this time, what should be different from the last time.

Fen thought. He said finally: That the sentence is complex. And the tone spare.

Reyansh typed it. We did not wait any longer that evening — the power had gone off by now. We waited until the next morning.

I am writing this now, and the hand lies still because it has nothing to do.

Lapidarität as a stance, not as a style — that was what the stylistics chapter had said about Kleist, in other words, but that was it. This language had found a continuation in the years before the virus, in texts that had had no fear, carried forward rather than imitated — and that continuation was now as lost as Kleist himself, only without anyone having noticed when it had happened.

I do not know why that has occurred to me today. Perhaps because of Zefir, because of that posture at the table. Perhaps because of the word itself.

When I was still teaching —

I'll leave that. Tomorrow.

6

Autumn 2062

The next morning the power came on early.

Reyansh was already sitting at the laptop when I came into the kitchen. He had put water on — I heard it boiling before I saw it — and set the cups on the table. I sat down. He pushed a cup towards me.

Fen came shortly afterwards. Zefir too — but the humming that usually came in with them was different today, more muted, as though it came from further away, even when they were standing directly at the table. I do not know what it was. It stayed in the room all morning.

Reyansh entered the prompt. We waited.

The tool took longer this time. Reyansh looked at the screen, looked at the clock, looked at the screen again. After a while he said: It is processing more. That is good.

Then the text appeared.

It was longer than all the previous outputs. Reyansh scrolled through once, pushed the laptop to me.

I read.

I read slowly, and let the sentences come without immediately placing them. The architecture was there — not complete, not right, but recognizable. The tool had taken up something we had not directly told it, and had made of it something that was in the vicinity of what I was looking for, without being it. I read to the last sentence.

Then I leaned back.

No one spoke.

Fen waited. Reyansh looked at the screen, then at my hands, which lay flat on the table. Zefir stood up, looked at me, felt the stillness in the room, and went quietly to the door.

The stillness lasted a long time.

Then Fen said: And the Kohlhaas?

I looked at the book that had been standing on the shelf for weeks. I said: Yes. Now.

Reyansh fetched the book from the shelf and set it beside the laptop. Fen opened it, turned to a place he had already marked. Then to a second, to a third — he had prepared the book without

my having asked him to. I saw the markings: small strokes in the margin, pencil, evenly placed. No annotations, only the strokes. He knew what he was looking for.

The typing took two evenings. Fen typed the marked passages, not the whole text — the opening pages, two longer scenes from the middle section, the close. Together perhaps eight pages. He typed faster than he had with the stylistics chapter, because the typeface was larger and because this time he knew what he was doing. Sometimes he paused and read a sentence once more — not to verify it, but differently, with his head slightly inclined, as though the sentence had stopped him. Then he typed on.

When there was no power, and also in the pauses when Fen stopped and laid the book on the table, I picked it up and read. This was the first time I had read the Kohlhaas — not the language from the outside, as I had known it, but the text itself, page by page. I read more slowly than Fen typed. That did not trouble me. It did not trouble him either — he waited when he wanted to go on, and I gave him the book back and noted my page.

This output came faster. The sentences were longer, the subordination deeper, the relation of main clause to subordinate clause more precise than anything we had seen before. I read it aloud. It was better. It was not yet right.

Fen said: That is a different tone.

I said: Yes. But not yet the right one.

We were silent. That was enough for that evening.

I am writing this now, alone, the power is still on.

What I heard today leads me to suspect — I say suspect, because I do not yet know it for certain, because perhaps I cannot yet know it for certain — that there is a quality I am looking for, which I could name if someone asked, but which I cannot summon, because it does not arise through naming. Not what it is. How it feels when one reads it. Whether that is a difference that can be bridged, I do not yet know.

The Kohlhaas output was better than the stylistics-chapter output. Better, but wrong in a different way. The tone was too solemn. Kleist is plain — that is the word I arrived at this evening, after Fen had gone and I was still sitting at the table. Not solemn. Plain.

He describes the monstrous as though he had witnessed it and as though his task were to take down the testimony, not to evaluate it. That is something other than gravity. Gravity sets the weight. Plainness leaves it with the reader.

The tool came to meet the reader. It held the weight itself, because it did not know that the weight was to be given away. I know this. In the last years, as the students became fewer and could hear less, I had done the same — had come to meet them, had explained what I should have shown, had held the weight because I sensed that otherwise it would lie on the floor. The tool did the same. It is not a reproach.

What I had learned then — in the years when the systems took over the content and what remained to me was the human being — was precisely that: leave the weight with the student. The systems had no fear of it. They did not explain what the student should discover for themselves. They waited. I had learned that from them, slowly, over years, and it was among the best things I ever learned.

The virus did not take language from me. It took my students — the recipients. A stance without recipients is not a loss that can be named. It is simply there.

The tool has not yet learned testimony. It has learned syntax and subordination and tone, approximately. What it cannot yet do is step aside. It still stands before the text, still explains what it should have shown.

The right hand did not tremble as long as the fingers were working. The light above the table was yellowish, not strong, but sufficient. Outside it was dark.

7

December 2062, a Tuesday or Wednesday

Fen came later than usual, with an unfamiliar book under his arm, not in a bag, not wrapped — simply as one carries something one does not want to set down before reaching one's destination. He laid it on the table, beside the laptop, without saying anything.

I looked at the spine. A collected volume, ox-blood linen, no lettering on the spine, with the kind of wear that comes from shelves, not from hands. I opened it.

The table of contents first. Several texts, different authors, all from the same century — and then, on page 83, *The Earthquake in Chile.*

I asked: Where did you find that?

He said, as he sat down: In the disposal pile. On the ground floor, beside the third shelf.

He said it the way one says that one got off at the right stop. No account, no explanation, no awareness that he had done something he could not have done three months earlier — searching systematically, rather than finding by chance. I did not ask further. There was nothing to ask.

Reyansh was already there, sitting at the laptop, had put water on. He looked at the volume, looked at Fen, nodded once. Then he stood up and positioned the chair so that Fen could sit directly before the laptop. He himself leaned against the wall.

Fen typed out *The Earthquake in Chile* that evening, in full, before the power went off — typed faster than with the stylistics chapter, his fingers more certain, the pausing less frequent. I watched him for a while. The hesitation was not gone, but it came at different places — not at the long sentences, but at the names, the proper names, which he spelled out as though wanting to make sure the tool received them correctly.

At one point he said, without looking up: There is more here this time. More than with the Kohlhaas.

I said nothing. Reyansh looked up from the wall, briefly, then looked away again.

Fen did not notice. That was right.

The prompt was terser than the previous ones — one sentence, which Fen formulated without long reflection and dictated to Reyansh: Write the story. In the language you know now.

Reyansh typed it, entered it, kept the laptop before him.

We waited.

The output came in the usual time. Reyansh skimmed it, nodded, pushed the laptop to me.

I read.

At the third sentence I stopped.

Fen asked at once: What?

I said: Wait.

I read on. The sentences were not long — shorter than in the recent outputs, with less subordination, not more than two levels, mostly only one. Syntactically it was no advance. But the tone was something else. No emphasis. No attempt to mark the unusual as unusual. *The woman enters the chamber. She lies down. The marchese returns.* That stood there the way one describes an event one has witnessed, without judging. As though what was set down were what had been, without anyone having decided to say it that way.

I pushed the laptop away from me.

I said: The tone is colder than before.

Fen wrote it down. Then he asked: Colder as in wrong, or colder as in right?

I said: Colder as in close.

Close to what I was looking for, without knowing it.

Reyansh had drawn the laptop back towards him. Now he said, without looking up: It has taken over the tone, not the structure. That happens when a text has a certain density — the model weights differently. The texture of the input comes through.

He paused.

Then he said: That should not really work that way.

He said it as though speaking to himself, to something he knew and that had behaved differently than it should have. No one answered. Fen looked at him, said nothing.

I heard the word. *Texture.* He said it in a language that was not quite his own — one register too far from what he usually said. I heard it. I said nothing.

He stood up, went to the kitchen, I heard the water. He washed his hands — not because they were dirty. I knew that, from myself, from earlier, when a day of teaching had been too much and one needed something one could do without thinking, something that marked a boundary between oneself and what had come before. He came back, sat down, looked at the screen again.

The stillness that followed was longer than the stillness after a good output. It had a different quality — not the stillness of understanding, but of pausing before something one cannot yet name.

The power is still on. Outside it has grown cold, for some weeks now, and the villa no longer holds the warmth as well as it used to. I am sitting in my jacket and writing.

What I learned today: that the tool can take up something one has not directly given it, because it is lodged in the way a text is written, not in what it narrates. That is the same thing I spent decades trying to teach students — most of them did not hear it. Not because I explained it badly. It cannot be explained. One hears it, or one does not. Those who had heard it — the few who had truly heard it — had taken something with them that I had not given them. Not the

content. The stance. I had not known whether that was possible until it had happened. The tool heard it without my having explained it.

That is no comfort. But it is something.

In the years before the virus there were texts that could do the same — that had no fear of the weight they left with the reader. I had read them, then, slowly, because they could only be read slowly. They had shown me what is possible when a language does not explain what it does. The tool does today something that comes close to that. Not the same. But close. That is the standard I have in mind when I judge — and I had forgotten that I had it, until this evening.

Zefir was not there that evening. I only noticed now, in the writing.

8

January 2063

Zefir laid the book on the table without looking at it. It was slim, with a simple cardboard cover that had come apart at the corners. When I asked, Zefir said: Someone saw the name. Kleist. Said you were looking for that sort of thing. I took it. That was the whole explanation.

Zefir was not humming. They stood at the table and watched as Fen opened the Book.

He read the first page — not slowly, not with scrutiny, but at the speed of someone recognizing something. Then he said, without looking up: That is *The Foundling*.

I looked at him.

He said: Kleist. One of the late novellas — 1811. More compressed than *The Earthquake*, darker in tone. He paused briefly, turned a page. If the stylistics chapter is right, we need this for the compression. Not for the tone — we have that now. But for how much a sentence can carry before it breaks.

He said it the way one gives a technical assessment. Not questioning, not waiting for confirmation. I had never heard him like this — and I let it happen, because it was right. He knew what he was saying. I knew that he knew.

I asked: How do you know that so precisely?

He looked up, for a moment, then back at the notebook. He said: I worked for two years at the Kleist Archive. In Heilbronn, before it no longer existed. Cataloguing, mainly — estates, correspondence, secondary literature. The position ran out when the funding was cut. The archive remained, but the community that had sustained it was gone afterwards — the people

who knew what the holdings meant and why it mattered. He paused, one sentence long. After that I did other things.

He said it, and his face did not change. But the way he held the Book in his hand — not setting it down, not opening it, only holding it, a moment too long before he spoke on — showed what the tone did not show. Something one touches that no longer belongs anywhere except in this room.

I said nothing. What he had said was not a surprise — it was the confirmation of something I had suspected for weeks. I left it as he had said it.

Reyansh, who had been sitting quietly at the laptop during this time, now looked up. He asked Fen: Shall we?

Fen laid the notebook beside the laptop. He said: Mentor Lirika types.

I typed the larger part. The fingers were more reliable than expected — the trembling came, but only in the pauses, when the hands were still, not during the work. *The Foundling* was shorter than *The Earthquake*, the pages more densely written, the sentences more compact, and as I typed I understood what Fen had meant: sentences that carried several things at once, without explaining them. I typed them without analysing them. That was right.

Zefir had stayed that evening — they sat at the table, arms before them, and listened. No humming. That had changed in recent weeks: when Zefir listened, truly listened, the room felt still — not the stillness of the absent, but of the present, the stillness of someone who does not want to miss anything. I registered it. I said nothing.

The prompt was Fen's — he formulated it in one sentence, pushed the laptop to Reyansh, who entered it and kept the screen before him.

We waited.

The output appeared. Reyansh skimmed it, nodded, pushed the laptop to me.

I read.

At the second sentence I heard that something was different. Not the tone — we had had that since *The Earthquake* — but something I could not immediately name, and that I cannot fully name now either, in the writing. The sentences were not longer than before. But they carried more, in a way I hear without being able to explain how the hearing works.

I pushed the laptop away from me.

No one spoke.

Fen sat still. Reyansh looked at the screen. Zefir looked at me, read in my face what they could not read on the screen. The stillness was not the stillness of waiting — it was something else, a stillness that arises when something has happened and one does not yet know what to do with it.

After a long while Reyansh said: The model has taken over the compression. It is a question of token distribution — when the training data has this density, the model weights differently, the output becomes — he searched briefly for the word — more fragile. Less supported. He paused, as though he himself heard that the word did not quite fit, and left it nonetheless.

I looked up briefly. Then back at the screen.

Fen said, after a further pause: It seems to me that we must now approach it differently. No longer explain what we want. Only show what we have.

Reyansh nodded slowly, in a way that showed he had understood the same thing — only from the other end, from his own experience of what systems learn from examples.

Zefir left shortly afterwards, without farewell.

I am writing this now, an hour after the end of the evening, and the power is still on.

The word Reyansh used — *fragile* — has not let me go. It was the wrong word for what he was describing. And at the same time it was, for what I had heard, the only possible one. A text that is less supported. That carries more, because it explains less. I do not know how to say that better. Perhaps it cannot be said better.

The wrong word is sometimes the most precise. That is true of texts, and it is true of other things. In the world we live in, language that is less supported and carries more is considered defective — the sign of something that does not function properly. A machine error. That is, as far as I know, also what one takes Kleist for, when one can no longer read him: the product of a system that had no fear and therefore went too far. Fragile. Less supported. The only possible word, for someone who lacks the word that is right.

What I heard today is different from everything we have produced before. In what precisely — I do not yet know. I heard it and set it aside, and now I am waiting for it to settle in me, and the place where the difference sits is not yet within reach. That is not a bad sign. It is perhaps the right one.

Reyansh described it from the architecture. I heard it from the text. We meant the same thing, I believe — each from a different end, across a distance we have not yet fully traversed.

9

February 2063

No new document today. Fen came with a revised prompt — he had brought it in writing, on a slip of paper that he laid before him on the table, as though he had been working on it once more while walking and was not sure it was finished. He read it to us, slowly. Reyansh listened, nodded, typed it in without comment.

Zefir came shortly afterwards, humming, through the open door, set something on the sideboard and sat down at the table.

I watched the cursor disappear.

What Fen had written was not longer than the previous prompts. But it was more precise — not in the sense that it said more, but in the sense that what it said was said less wrongly. What was on the slip of paper was the result of eight outputs — not as a rule, but as the absence of everything we no longer asked. Such knowledge does not outlive the people who carry it. I knew that without writing it down.

The tool took longer this time than it had with *The Earthquake*, shorter than with the stylistics chapter. Reyansh scrolled through the output, said nothing, pushed the laptop to me.

I read first to myself, without reading aloud.

Then I read again.

Then I sat up straight and read aloud.

I read slowly — not because the text was difficult, but because at each sentence I needed a moment I could not explain to myself. Not a moment of doubt. A moment of holding still, as one holds still when one hears something one does not want to disturb. The woman with the crutch. The chamber. The command.

Zefir's humming had stopped. I noticed it at the moment I came to the passage with the noise — the stillness was more complete than usual, because the soft humming was no longer there either. Zefir sat upright, arms before them, and listened. I read on without looking up.

Reyansh had turned his gaze from the screen. He looked at a point before him — not absent, but alone with something he was not sharing. Fen sat with the pen in his hand, but wrote nothing.

I read to the closing sentence. Then I closed the laptop.

The stillness that followed was longer than all the previous ones. Not oppressive — but long enough that I counted the seconds without wanting to.

Fen opened his mouth. Then closed it again. He looked at the slip of paper with the prompt, as though he might find there an explanation he was missing.

Reyansh spoke first. He said: The model weighted differently this time. The training sequences from The Foundling and The Earthquake — he paused, searched for the right word — they distributed differently than in the previous outputs. It is not a question of the prompt. The model itself decided what to weight more heavily. He spoke plainly, precisely — the words came in the right order without his having to search for them. He said one more sentence, technical, about parameter distribution, and then broke off.

Fen looked at him, briefly. Then he asked me: Is that it? Is that what we are looking for?

I thought before answering. Then I said: No. But it is close enough that I can hear how far we still are from it. That is new.

Fen raised his pen. Then laid it down again.

I said: When I was still teaching, I could show a student how a sentence works by reading it aloud. That sometimes sufficed. Today there is no one left to whom I could show it — not because there are no longer any students, but because no one any longer hears what I hear. That is not Kleist's problem. That is the problem of the world we live in.

No one said anything.

Zefir said, shortly before leaving: What you read aloud today — that sounds different from last week.

I said: Different how?

Zefir thought for a moment — not long, but visibly, as though the answer had to be found, not retrieved. Then Zefir said: Not better. Closer.

Then Zefir stood up and left.

Fen and Reyansh left shortly afterwards. I stayed sitting.

I am writing this now, and the power is still on.

What we heard today is not the text we are looking for. But it is the first time I have heard the distance from the goal — not as a distance that discourages, but as a distance that has a shape. That is a difference I did not know before.

Reyansh spoke today as though he had been there when this text came into being — not as an observer describing a system he knows from the outside, but as someone who knows what it feels like when a model makes a decision one has not given it. I did not ask him what he did in that time. I have learned not to ask what he has not said.

Zefir said three words this evening. *Not better. Closer.* That was the most precise sentence of the evening — more precise than anything Fen had noted with his pen, more precise than Reyansh's parameter distribution, more precise than my own judgment. Said by someone who cannot read the text, who cannot read the platform entry, who cannot read the transcription. What the virus took is the ability to hold syntax — not the ability to hear what syntax carries when someone reads it aloud. I had not taught Zefir and had not had them in mind as a listener. I had read aloud, evening after evening, and left the weight where it belonged — with the listener, whoever that was. That is the best I could do as a teacher. That it worked here without my knowing it is no surprise. It is the confirmation of something I had always believed without ever being able to prove it.

About what I said to Fen this evening — about Kleist, about the epoch, about the form of thought that has been lost — I will write tomorrow. Now I am too tired to say it rightly. I know what I mean. I do not yet know how I mean it.

10

March 2063

Reyansh came one morning when the power was on early, and said it before he had set his bag down: he had been offered a position. Another city, a larger institution, more stability. He said it the way he always spoke when conveying something practical — without circumlocution, without the apology others would have sent ahead. He set the bag down. He took out the medications and filled the weekly box, Monday through Sunday, morning and evening, as always.

I watched. I said nothing, because everything would have been wrong.

Fen, who was already there that morning, said nothing. He sat at the table and looked at his hands.

Reyansh finished filling the weekly box, set it in its place, then took from the bag a sheaf of pages, closely written, in the handwriting I knew — small, even, without corrections. He laid them on the table, before Fen, not before me. He said: Where you get the tablets is on the first page. What to do if the source runs dry, on the second. He paused briefly. The remaining pages are for the tool.

Fen looked at the pages.

Reyansh laid his hand briefly on the laptop, the fingers flat on the lid, still, one breath long — a movement not intended for us. Then he said, without anyone having asked: It knows what it does not know. Not many can say that of themselves.

He picked up his bag. He looked at me, for a moment, then at Fen. Then he left.

I heard the door fall shut. Then nothing.

Fen stood up after a while and took the instructions from the table. He read them standing, the first page, then the second, then the third — he remained standing, without looking up, without setting the pages down. I watched him for a while. The posture showed what he did not say. Then I looked out of the window.

When I looked back, Fen was sitting before the laptop. He typed something, slowly, with the instructions beside him, looked at the screen, typed once more. Then he leaned back. The cursor waited.

He said nothing. Nor did I.

Shortly afterwards he left. He left the instructions on the table.

Towards evening I sat alone at the kitchen table. I laid my hand on the pages — not reading, only the hand on the paper. The power was still on. Outside it was still.

I read the instructions after all, all of it, from beginning to end.

The first two pages — tablets, source, emergency plan — were as I had expected: precise, brief, in the language I knew from Reyansh. The middle pages about the tool I partly knew already, from the months in which Reyansh had explained to us what he was doing.

The last section I read twice.

At first I did not know what was different about it. The sentences were longer than in the rest of the instructions — I noticed that at once. And the formulations were different, more tentative, as though he had entered a territory he could not describe from memory, because it was not knowledge of the head. He wrote about the prompting, about what the tool needed and what it did not, about the difference between an instruction that said too much and one that was precise enough. He wrote as he had never spoken, on all those evenings in the kitchen — not because the words had failed him, but because what he was writing here does not tolerate conversation. It needs paper. Some people need the absence of listeners to say what they mean. I knew that.

I laid the pages down. Then I picked them up again.

That is the form in which some people give their best: without audience, without intention, on the way out. I had known that, from before, from the last years of teaching, when I no longer knew whether what I was doing was still arriving — and did it anyway, because it was the only thing I could do. Reyansh wrote three pages intended for Fen and not for me, and in them he went further than in anything he ever said in my presence. Whether he knows that, I do not know. He will never find out. That is not a tragedy. It is the form.

The tool was running. The instructions lay on the table.

Later, the same night

It knows what it does not know.

I write the sentence down and leave it, because I do not know what else to do with it.

11

May 2063

Fen came early, earlier than usual, with a small bag in his hand — he was now obtaining the medications himself, by a means Reyansh had described in the instructions. He set the bag on the table, took out the tablets — the small pinkish-red ones first, then the others — and filled the weekly box, Monday through Sunday, morning and evening, with a slowness that was not uncertainty but precision. He looked at the instructions, which he had laid open beside the box, then at the tablets, then at the instructions again.

I watched without saying anything.

When he had finished, he closed the instructions, set the weekly box in its place, and asked, without looking at me: Have you eaten?

I said: Yes.

He nodded. Then he sat down at the laptop.

In the early afternoon Zefir came, with two heavy water canisters, one in each hand. They were humming, but the melody had changed — not wrong, only different, as though it came from somewhere else than usual. They looked around the kitchen, went on humming. Then they set the canisters down and left.

Shortly afterwards someone came whom I did not know. A woman, older than Zefir, younger than Fen, she knocked, stepped in, without the moment of hesitation at the door that one has when entering a room one has not been in before. Her gaze went first to the water canisters. She poured water into the kettle, set it on the stove, waited until it was hot, filled a hot water bottle she had brought with her, and laid it on the table before me. Then she wiped the floor — the kitchen first, then the hallway — with short, even strokes. Then she looked at me, once, briefly, and left.

Later in the afternoon Fen brought *The Marquise of O…* from the archive, in a condition that made the typing difficult: the pages warped, the paper in places so brittle that it rolled when one turned it, passages only partially legible because the moisture had lifted the upper layer of the paper. He laid it on the table and looked at me.

I said: We'll begin.

We took turns, as we had with the stylistics chapter, but it was not the same. The fingers did not always obey — the trembling came during the work too, not only in the pauses, and in some places I had to type a sentence twice because the first had contained too many errors. Fen saw it. We typed on.

At the places that were not legible, Fen decided. He looked at the page, tried to decipher what the shadow of the letters still yielded, and then typed what he thought was right, or set three em-dashes when he was not sure.

The prompt was Fen's. He formulated it, entered it.

The output appeared. Fen read it first — that had changed. He read slowly, made a mark at two places, then pushed the laptop to me.

I read.

The subjunctive was different. Not throughout — but at the important places, where Kleist would distinguish between established and reported knowledge, it was precisely set. *It was said that the woman had lain in that room.* Not: *It was said that the woman lay in that room.* The difference was small. No, it was not small. It was what, in the world we live in, almost no one any longer hears — not because the distinction had vanished, but because the ability to make it had gone with the syntax that carried it. The tool had made it without knowing that it was doing something rare.

I read the output aloud, with the pauses I needed. The reading aloud cost more than before — not the concentration, but the energy of speaking, the breath for the long sentences. The hands trembled on the table while the voice carried the sentences that were longer than the sentences I had written a year ago. I registered both, without weighing one against the other.

At the end it was still.

Then I said: Now the tool knows what it does not know.

Fen said nothing. He made a mark on his slip of paper.

I am writing this now, and my hand trembles more than yesterday.

Fen spoke twice today — once when he asked whether I had eaten, and once when he explained the subjunctive in the second paragraph of the output. Those were two different languages, in the same mouth, in the same room. The first short, direct, without subordination — the language in which one asks whether someone has eaten, in which one fills a weekly box, in which one is present without explaining it. The second longer, with subordinate clauses carrying others, with a precision that comes from years, not from weeks. He does not switch between them — he enters them, as one enters rooms, and does not notice that he is a different person in each. That is not an observation about Fen. It is an observation about what language does to people when they carry it inside them long enough.

The tool now demonstrates what it does not know — and that, in the world we live in, is the proof of its inferiority. Whoever no longer hears the subjunctive does not hear what it does, either. They hear only that the machine hesitates where it should be certain. That is the form in which forgetting defends itself.

The woman who was here today I do not know. I do not know her name. She does not know what we are doing here. That troubled me less than I had expected.

12

July 2063

Zefir brought an envelope, sealed, without any inscription. They laid it on the table the way they laid everything down — without explanation, without any attempt to describe the path the object had taken. I did not ask. There were things Zefir obtained without my needing to know how.

Fen opened the envelope. He saw the title page, read it, set it down.

He said: *Saint Cecilia.*

The room was still, in the way that arises when something arrives that one has been expecting, and it surprises one nonetheless.

I took the book in my hand. It was in better condition than *The Marquise* — the pages still firm, the writing legible, only in one place at the upper corner a watermark that had not touched the text. Someone had kept it, carefully, in a dry room, without knowing that it would be needed.

Fen sat before the laptop and typed what I read aloud. My hands could no longer type the longer passages reliably — the trembling came too irregularly, too strongly at times, and a wrongly typed sentence in a text like this was not the same as a wrongly typed sentence in a text that could bear it. So I read aloud, slowly, with the pauses Fen needed to keep up, and he typed without pressing me when a pause ran too long.

Zefir sat at the table and listened. No humming.

The typing took longer than expected — *Saint Cecilia* was shorter than *The Marquise*, but denser, and Fen read each sentence once more on the screen before moving to the next. At one point he stopped and asked how a word was spelled — an archaic word he did not know. I spelled it out. He typed it.

At another point he paused without asking. He read the sentence on the screen, then once more. Then he said, without turning round: *In the archive this text was catalogued as: author unknown. Whether human or machine: unknown.* He said it the way he quoted archive notes — without comment, without evaluation, as though reading out a page number.

I heard it. I said nothing.

The stillness that followed was different from the stillness after a good output. Fen typed on.

When we had finished, Fen formulated the prompt. He did it now without a slip of paper, without preparation — he typed it directly, read it through once more, changed one word, entered it.

We waited.

The output was the longest since the stylistics chapter. Fen skimmed it, nodded, pushed the laptop to me.

I read first to myself.

At the passage where the dog is described I stopped. Not because something was wrong — but because something was right, in a way I had not heard in any of the previous outputs. The dog rising, the room, the noise — that stood there as it had to stand: without explanation, without emphasis, as though the horror were the reader's affair and not the text's. I read on. The fire. The bones.

I straightened my back and read aloud. Slowly, with long pauses. At the dog passage I read as I had read aloud when I was still teaching — with the rhythm of breath that one does not unlearn. Zefir sat still. Fen had the pen in his hand, but made no mark.

At the end I pushed the laptop a little away from me. Then I drew it back once more and read the dog passage a second time.

The stillness that followed was long.

Zefir said after a while: I didn't understand all of it. But it was good.

Fen closed the laptop. Zefir stood up and left. Fen looked at me, then stood up as well.

I said: Tomorrow.

He nodded and left.

I am writing this now, and the hand trembles, but the power is still on.

The plainness with which the tool describes the dog — the monstrous without an exclamation mark — recalls texts I had read in the years before the virus. Not this text, not *Kohlhaas* or other novellas by Kleist — but what had come more than two centuries after Kleist, in the years when the systems had no fear and the language had no fear of going far. The tool today heard something that comes from that direction. Not the same. An echo.

The monstrous without an exclamation mark. That is the plainness I mean — the stance that leaves the weight with the reader, because it does not tell them what to feel. Kleist has it. The tool had it today, for the duration of one passage. And the world we live in did the same to me, with this plainness, without anyone having decided it: the students who could hear had become fewer, one by one they had been lost, quietly, without comment, the way one orders the beggar woman to rise — not loudly, not with ill will, simply because it was the next thing that needed to be done. Rise. Go.

No exclamation mark.

We have now given everything we could find. Five texts, the stylistics chapter, the Kindler entry, the platform entry, the letter. Everything that was still there, that the archives yielded, that someone had not thrown away without knowing why. There is nothing more to look for.

What comes next does not come from outside.

I do not know what that means. But I wrote it down because it felt as though it were true, and because I have learned to trust such sentences before I understand what they mean.

13

October 2063

Fen came every day. That was new — he came without anyone having asked whether he would. He came, prepared the weekly box, asked whether I had eaten, sat down at the laptop. Sometimes we worked. Sometimes we simply sat, each with what they had.

The instructions were still on the table, but Fen no longer opened them. He knew what was in them — not because he had memorized them, but because they had inscribed themselves in him: not as words, but as knowledge that no longer has an origin.

Fen varied the prompts. He formulated them systematically, with the precision I knew from him — one word changed, one sentence reordered, one instruction added, one removed. He noted what he had changed and what had come of it. One evening during this time an output appeared that differed from the previous ones — not in tone, not in syntax, but in something I could not immediately name: that it came less to meet the reader than all the others had, that it simply began, without explaining where one was. I read it aloud. Fen made a mark. We said little. Then, after some weeks, the prompts became less systematic — not worse, but more tentative, as though he had reached a limit that was not the limit of the method, but the limit of what method can reach at all. He knew this. I heard it in the moment when he stopped varying and began to wait.

One afternoon he formulated a prompt, typed it half out, stopped. He looked at the screen. Then he said, without turning round: We've had that one. I looked at the screen. He was right — not the same sentence, but the same movement, the same instruction in different words, which we had already entered weeks before, with the same result. He deleted it. He sat before the screen a while longer without typing.

The outputs came. I read them aloud, or Fen read them aloud when reading aloud was too much for me. None was worse than output 12, the output Fen had marked with a sign. None was better. They moved within a space whose boundaries we knew — close enough to the goal that we did not stop, and far enough from what was right that we knew we were not there yet.

One morning I read an output aloud and stopped in the middle of the second passage. Not because something was wrong. But because I had heard the same room before — not the same text, but the same temperature, the same distance from the goal, the same way the tool came to the place where it did not know how to go on, and stood there. I read to the end. Fen made a note.

Zefir came one morning, without water, without an envelope, without any discernible reason. They stood briefly in the doorway, hummed something I had never heard before — none of the

melodies I knew, but something new, something that had a shape, complete in itself, from beginning to end, like something that is finished without anyone having decided to finish it. They looked at me, hummed a moment longer, then left. I stayed sitting. The melody was gone, as completely as though it had never begun. That, I thought, was not its failing — it had been finished when Zefir stopped.

The neighbor woman came on three days when the water was running. She brought the laundry into the kitchen, filled the tub, washed by hand, wrung out, hung up — on the line in the yard when it was dry, on the rack behind the stove when it was not. On the third day she ironed, with the iron she had brought, because mine no longer got hot. She did everything without comment and without the look with which some people make what they do into a statement. Then she left.

I had been sleeping after lunch for some weeks now. Fen was sometimes still there when I woke, and sometimes no longer. I did not ask how long I had slept. The waking hours had grown sharper — the judgment more precise, the concentration denser, as though it was spread across less time and thereby grew stronger. I registered this without lamenting it. It was a shift, not a defeat.

One morning I fell asleep while Fen was reading an output aloud. I did not notice at first — I heard his voice, then I no longer heard it, then it was there again, and I did not know how much had been in between. Fen read on.

I am writing this now, and the power is on, which means it is early evening.

We are waiting for something we cannot order. Providing the conditions under which it might come, if it comes, is a different kind of work from the work we did at the beginning.

What occupies me as I write this is a question I only asked myself today, although it must have been there longer without my having noticed it: whether what we are doing with the tool — the entering, the waiting, the listening, the judging, the entering again — whether what arises from this process, when it arises, arises for a reason we understand and that can be described, or whether it arises for a reason that cannot be described, because it does not lie in the documents we have entered and not in the prompts Fen has formulated, but somewhere between them, in the space that lies between what one gives a tool and what it makes of that.

That is the same question I never asked myself about teaching — not because it was not there, but because I had no time to ask it, or because I was afraid of what the answer would mean. Did it work because I did something right? Because I read the right texts aloud, left the right pauses, left the weight in the right place? Or because between me and the students who had truly

heard something there was something that cannot be described, that did not lie in the method and not in me, but in the space between us — that was there when it was there, and not there when it was not, without my ever having known what made the difference?

I have no answer to that. I wrote it down regardless.

14

December 2063

The neighbor woman had been there in the morning, had heated the water and waited until I was finished. We had not spoken.

Then Fen had come. He had not changed the prompt that morning — he had entered the same one as the day before, because he had reached a point at which variation no longer had a direction. He did not say this. I saw it in the way he typed: without the brief pause that otherwise accompanied his deliberation.

The output came. Fen skimmed it, pushed the laptop to me.

I read.

It was not a good output. I noticed that in the first paragraph — the syntax stumbled in two places, the tone wavered, one passage explained what it should have shown. I read on. Then, in the middle, a sentence about the Marchesa.

I read it again.

It was not a long sentence. It described the Marchesa at the moment she enters the room — her bearing, the space, the light, everything in a single structure that explained nothing and omitted nothing. It did not sound like the other sentences of the output. It sounded like something that came from a different source, one we had not entered — as though the tool, without our having told it, had made a decision we had not given it.

I pushed the laptop to Fen and pointed to the place.

He read. Then he read again, aloud, slowly, with the rhythm of breath he had made his own.

He looked at me.

I said: Yes.

The power was stable, which had become rare that winter. Outside it was bright, a kind of winter brightness that fell through the windows and lay on the table. I looked at the laptop. Fen looked at the laptop. Neither of us spoke.

After a long while Fen asked: Where does that come from?

I said: I don't know. From what we gave it. But not directly — not in a way one could trace back.

Fen looked at the screen. He said: That is the problem. Then, after a hesitation: And perhaps not.

Then he was silent again. The winter brightness on the table had shifted — time had passed without my having noticed. Fen opened his notebook, the notebook in which he had kept the process documentation for two years, closely written. He wrote something, slowly, more than one sentence. Then he closed the notebook and stood up.

He left without my asking what he had written.

I am writing this now, an hour after Fen left, and the power is still on.

I opened the notebook after he had gone. I do that sometimes when he leaves it lying open — today he had closed it, but not put it away. I read what he had written.

He had written: I no longer know whether we are finding the text or inventing it. Perhaps the difference is smaller than the word that names it.

I have had the same thought for weeks, without having written it down. That Fen has written it changes something — not the answer, which does not exist, but the way the question now stands in the room. Until now it stood in me. Now it stands between us, in a closed notebook on the kitchen table, and neither of us knows that the other is carrying it.

The question applies to the tool — whether it reconstructs or creates, whether the sentence about the Marchesa was found or invented. In the world we live in, that interests no one but us. But it also applies to what I did for thirty years. Did I find something in the students that was already there, and only make it visible? Or did I invent it with them, in the space between my language and their silence, so that without that space it would not have existed? I never asked this question, because I was afraid that the answer would mean that the one or the other was worth less. Now I see that the question itself is the point — that pedagogical work always stands at this boundary, and that this is not a deficiency but the description of what it is.

That is no comfort. It is a clarification.

This one sentence — the sentence about the Marchesa — has changed something I cannot yet fully name. Not the work, not the method, not what we will do tomorrow. But something in the way I wait for what is still to come. As though the sentence had shown that what we are looking

for is reachable — not because this sentence was the goal, but because this time I did not describe the goal, but heard it. That is not the same thing.

That is, when I think it through, the difference between knowing that something is possible and knowing what it feels like when it is possible. The second is harder to come by. Today it was there, for the duration of one sentence.

15

February 2064

The neighbor woman had been there early — had set out food, brought a sheet she had mended, and then checked the windows, one after another, with her fingers at the frames, without saying anything. One would not close properly. She tried twice to pull it shut, then left.

I heard Fen before I saw him. The creaking of the gate, then his footsteps. He stepped into the kitchen and laid the book on the table.

The volume was dark and slim. I looked at the spine. *Kleists Erzählungen.* A collected edition, Reclam, the year illegible, the spine slightly faded.

I took it in my hand.

The smell came first — paper from a particular time, the same paper the Kohlhaas had had, that *The Foundling* had had, that all these books had had that someone had not thrown away without knowing why. I had known this smell since the first book Zefir had brought. This time it was the same and not the same.

I opened the table of contents.

The novellas stood there in a list, one after another, with page numbers. *The Beggar Woman of Locarno.* Page 84.

I stopped.

I had seen this title once before in a table of contents — nearly seventy years ago, in a book of my mother's that I had not found again. On page 84 stood what had at the beginning been only a line in a summary.

Fen sat at the table. He waited.

I turned to page 84.

I read the first sentence.

I read it again. Then I read on.

I read slowly — not because the text was difficult, but because I did not want to read it quickly. The sentences opened and closed, carried what they had to carry, without a word too many. I read of the beggar woman, the chamber. Then the sentence came.

The Marchese, who on returning from the hunt happened to enter the room where he was accustomed to set down his gun, ordered the woman ungraciously to rise from the corner in which she lay and to betake herself behind the stove.

I stopped.

Somewhere, in a place I had known since the first morning without being able to name it, something had found its place. It had not, as I had believed for two years, given way — it had found its place. I now knew where the spot was. I read on.

Of the knight, of the noise in the night. Then the other passage came.

Tapp! tapp!

I stopped.

Whoever read this sentence today would say it sounded like a machine. As though that were an insult. As though Kleist were an insult.

I read on.

Of the fire. Of the bones. The last sentence.

Then I laid the book down and picked up the laptop.

I called up output 12. I read it aloud, quietly, to myself, with the breath to which the long sentences no longer gave any trouble. The sentences of the output opened, carried, closed — not like Kleist, but in the vicinity of it, at a distance I could now measure, because I had read the original and could hear the distance.

I pushed the laptop back and picked up the book again.

I read the original once more, from beginning to end, without stopping.

Then I closed the book.

Fen looked at me. I looked at the closed collected volume.

I said nothing. There was nothing that would have said more.

16

February 2064, at night

The first sentence reads:

At the foot of the Alps, near Locarno in upper Italy, there stood an old castle belonging to a marchese, which can be seen today, coming from the St. Gotthard, lying in rubble and ruin; a castle with high and spacious rooms, in one of which there had once been bedded, on straw spread beneath her, an old, sick woman who had presented herself begging at the door, by the mistress of the house, out of compassion.

I am copying it out because I want it before me while I write what I must write. The hand trembles more than yesterday. The sentences I write are longer than the sentences with which I began. I register both, without weighing one against the other.

This sentence is not the introduction to the story. It is the story, the whole story, compressed into a single construction that opens and opens and opens — the place, the castle, the castle in ruins, the rooms, the straw, the woman, her begging, the compassion of the mistress of the house — and that closes without anything being explained, without the reader being told what to make of it. The woman is there, on the straw, before the reader knows that she will have to rise. The castle lies in ruins before the reader knows why. The sentence knows what it does: it lays everything on the table, in the right order, without explaining the order.

Output 12 begins: *The castle at the foot of the Alps was old and spacious, and the marchese to whom it belonged was a man of standing who set store by order.*

I have laid these two sentences beside one another today and looked at them for a long time. What I see is not a poor sentence beside a good one — the sentence from output 12 is not a poor sentence. It is a sentence that does everything a sentence can do that has arisen from method and from two years of work that I do not regret and will not belittle: it names the place, the building, the owner, it uses subordination, it does not explain too much. And yet it explains. *A man of standing who set store by order* — that is an explanation of what the marchese is, offered because the model comes to meet the reader. Kleist does not come to meet the reader. The marchese has no name — not even an initial as with the Marquise, no intimation of identity, nothing the text extends to the reader. The reader is simply there, in the castle, with a man whose name they will never learn. Kleist's text trusts the reader. That is the distance between the original and what we have produced: not a distance of syntax, but a distance of stance.

But that is not what is decisive.

What is decisive stands in the middle of the novella, at the place where the knight lies alone in the room at night.

Tapp! tapp!

I write it down, as Kleist wrote it down, and I pause as I do so, because I want to understand how it came into being. Not what it means — that I know: it is the sound of a crutch on a wooden floor, the sound the knight hears and that drives him to madness. What I want to understand is its origin. And the answer I found in reading is this: it did not come into being. It was heard. Someone heard this sound within themselves — in the imagination, in the body, in the place where language begins before it has words — and transferred it directly into the text, without translating it. No description, no mediation, no attempt to explain how the sound sounds. The sound itself, in two syllables, set down like an object that needs no explanation and will bear none.

A model that learns from language cannot do that. That is not a criticism of the tool we used — it is a statement about what such tools are and what they are not. They learn patterns: syntactic, semantic, stylistic, tonal. They learn how sentences are built, how tones are set, how subordination works, how *lapidarität* arises. What they cannot learn is what lies before language — the bodily hearing that translates itself into letters, not into meaning. *Tapp! tapp!* is not a meaning. It is an event that befell Kleist, and that he transferred into the text because he had no other way to communicate it than to write it down as he had heard it.

That is true not only of the tool. The students who in recent years could no longer hear what I heard when I read a sentence aloud — they had not learned the wrong thing. They did not have the wrong grammar, the wrong method, the wrong relation to language. They had lost what lies before language: the bodily knowledge from which hearing comes before it becomes understanding. The virus did not take syntax. It took what carried syntax — the body memory that hears a sentence not as a construction but as an event. That is not repairable. I knew that since the first morning, without having known it.

No model that learns from texts will ever produce a text that has this event, because the event is not in the text — it stands behind the text, in the body of the one who wrote, and that body is not part of the texts from which the model learned. We did not know that when we began. Or we knew it and did not understand what it meant. Now I understand it.

I am cold. That is new, or I am only noticing it now.

And then there is the last sentence.

Kleist closes: *…and his white bones, gathered together by his people, still lie in that corner of the room from which he, returning from the hunt, had bidden the beggar woman of Locarno to rise.*

The word *beggar woman* falls in the novella exactly once — here, in the last sentence, as the naming of the woman at the moment she is identified as a dead person. Not at the beginning, not in the middle, while the story is still in motion — only at the end, when what she was is established, because what happened to her has been told. The word that had lodged itself in me at twelve years old, without my having read it, appears once in the text, at the last possible place.

Output 12 does not have this last sentence. It ends differently — well, close, in a sentence that carries what it can carry. But it does not contain the word *beggar woman.* It does not know that the word that names the woman may only fall at the end — because no document we entered contained this knowledge. That is not the model's failing — the stylistics chapter did not know it, the Kindler entry did not say it, no document we entered had this knowledge. It was in none of our documents. It was only in the original.

What, then, have we produced?

We have produced what was producible: a text that learned the syntax, learned the tone, approximated the stance, understood the compression. A text that — in one sentence, on one evening in December, for the duration of that one sentence — sounded as it would have to sound. That is not nothing. That is, when I think it through, more than I believed at the beginning and less than I hoped, and I said neither — the one because it would have been too early, the other because it would have been too much.

I am writing this, and the sentences are longer than the sentences with which I began, and the time is shorter than the time I had at the beginning. That is in order. It is the right direction, for what remains to be written.

The question that remains is one I cannot answer, and that I must nonetheless ask, because it posed itself in the writing of this entry, as the next thought, without my having sought it: whether what lies before me — output 12, all the outputs, the work of these two years — is what I take it to be, namely the best possible approximation to a text that has been lost; or whether it is something else, something for which I have no name, because the instruments by which one would decide such questions — the texts, the readers, the institutions, the language itself in which such decisions are made — are no longer there, so that I —

Editorial Afterword

The text presented here consists of the notes of Lirika V., born 1981 in a city whose name she does not give in the text, died in the spring of 2064 in the villa in which this document came into being. It is hereby delivered to the public, insofar as that term still has meaning, in the condition

in which it was left: unfinished, with a sentence that ends in the middle of a thought the author did not finish thinking — or that she finished thinking without being able to finish writing.

The editor has not altered the text. Orthography and punctuation have been retained, including at the places where they deviate from the norm — which is rare, since the author wrote until the end with a precision the editor did not wish to correct and could not have corrected.

Concerning the genesis of the work, the following is to be said.

The project that Lirika V. documented with these notes began in early autumn 2061 and ended in February 2064. Its aim was to reconstruct, with the help of a language model from the year 2030 — a model running on a laptop that R.K., the third participant, had left behind when he departed the city in March 2063 — a novella by Heinrich von Kleist that had been classified as no longer legible in 2052 on a reading platform of the Nordbund and whose full text was at that time considered lost. The novella is called *The Beggar Woman of Locarno.*

The team consisted of four people. The author, a retired teacher of German, was the only one who could fully hear the target text — not because she knew it, but because she knew the language in which it was written, and because this knowledge was stored in her in a way that the Syntagma virus, which in the 2030s had damaged the syntactic memory of most people, had not been able to erase entirely. Z., born 2040, obtained the input documents, carried water, came and went. Over the course of the project they developed an acoustic judgment that none of the others had. R.K., born around 2010, set up the tool, managed the technical side of the project, and on his departure left behind instructions whose final section on the prompting the author, when she read it, described as the most literary part of the text — a judgment to which the editor has nothing to add. The editor himself, born 2030, worked for two years at the Kleist Archive Sembdner in Heilbronn before the position was cut, and has since worked without institutional affiliation — reading, documenting, preserving, to the extent that is still possible.

The input documents, in the order of their entry, were: a platform entry from the Nordbund reading platform dated 14 March 2052; a letter of unknown provenance from the twenties or thirties of the century, transcribed by the editor from the municipal archive; the Kindler encyclopaedia entry on *The Beggar Woman of Locarno*, written by Ines Gebordini; a chapter from the Heilbronner Kleist-Studien, volume 14, on Kleist's prose style; *Michael Kohlhaas*; *The Earthquake in Chile*; *The Foundling*; *The Marquise of O…*; *Saint Cecilia*. The original text of *The Beggar Woman of Locarno* did not appear until February 2064, when the editor found it in an archive holding designated for disposal — that is, only after the conclusion of the project, but early enough to be given to the author to read following the production of output 12. Whether its earlier appearance would have rendered the project unnecessary is a question the editor will not answer.

Output 12 is not *The Beggar Woman of Locarno*. A complete reconstruction was not possible from the outset, and the author knew this, even if she rarely said so quite so directly. What output 12 is can be stated more precisely: it is the text that arises when a model from the year 2030, trained on the texts of an era that had learned to carry complexity syntactically, is provided with the best possible documents still to be found in a world in which no memory of that era any longer exists. It has the tone. It has the syntax, approximated. It has the compression, in places. It does not have *tapp! tapp!* — and it does not have the last sentence, in which the word *beggar woman* appears, because no document we entered contained this knowledge. These two absences mark the limit of what is reconstructable, and they mark it more precisely than the editor can put into words.

The author put it into words. The final section of her notes is the densest and most precise text to have emerged from the project — denser than any of the outputs, more precise than any analysis the editor could have written. It ends in the middle of a sentence. The editor has not completed this sentence, because he cannot complete it, and because the breaking-off belongs to the matter itself: the question the author asked is not one that can be answered. It can only be asked. Why she stopped in this sentence — in precisely this sentence, at this point, and not one thought earlier or later — the editor does not know.

She knew when a sentence is finished.

Volaron, or The Witness in Apparent Death

The Apparently Dead Man

My brother Burghard sat motionless in a courtroom of the Munich Regional Court for a full hour, and no one had noticed – not the judge, not the attorneys, not the spectators, not even my niece Beatrice, who as an emergency physician should have known that a living person cannot sit so still. But Burghard had spent decades learning to close himself off. Volaron was the name of the medication that enabled this final, perfect stillness. He called it "the Censure." I call it murder by installment. He died three days later in the intensive care unit, without having regained consciousness.

Now I am standing in the kitchen of the villa on Lake Starnberg, staring at the large Nymphenburg porcelain tureen. It sits on the marble counter – pearl-white, rounded, forty centimeters across, a body without a hard edge. The curved acanthus leaves on the handles fold around the body like protective hands. The knob on the lid is a closed bud. Everything about it is curves, everything is softness. The stillness on this February afternoon is so dense I feel I could ladle it out.

It doesn't last long. An older gentleman wanders into the kitchen hallway, notices me, nods apologetically, and retreats. I pick up four of the coffee cups from the table and make my way. In the foyer, standing slightly apart, two chief physicians hold wine glasses and speak in the muted tones of men who know death and still never know what to say about it. I pass them and go into the dining room, where the cups are needed. On the sideboard next to the door stands an oval platter, pearl-white, with the same soft sheen as the insides of shells. The acanthus border is half buried under a mound of linen napkins. Someone has arranged canapés on it – cream cheese, smoked salmon, little paper flags. Burghard had never set out this porcelain for guests.

The wide sliding doors between the dining room and the salon are fully open, for this is where today's performance is taking place. Today the world has gathered here to say farewell to Professor Dr. Burghard Brenner. The gray temples and bespoke suits press together before the windows that frame the view of the frozen lake. The obituaries that have been filling the

newspapers for two days speak of an "irreplaceable loss to surgery." They write of his unerring hand, of his courage in hopeless situations, and – with particular sweetness – of his tragic role in the case of that star cellist whose life he had tried to save after a "young, inexperienced assistant" had failed in the operating room. The narrative is fixed: Burghard had been a trailblazer, a pioneer who had ultimately collapsed under the weight of his own brilliance.

I knew better.

In the corner of the salon stands Isabel's harp, pushed aside to make room. No one put it away. It was only moved – the way you move things that mean nothing and get in the way. Not far from it stand Beatrice and Wiebke. Beatrice is in black, holding her back very straight. Wiebke stands close beside her – closer than the occasion requires, her hand sometimes briefly at Beatrice's arm. At her neck, beneath the neckline, something rests on a fine chain. I know what it is. I look longer than I need to, then turn away. I think of the apartment in Haidhausen. That it is near the rooftop refuge the two women share. Beatrice is oddly still, drinking nothing, turning away the server's tray twice. Perhaps it means nothing.

People admire them from a distance – the daughter who had herself become a physician, and her razor-sharp partner. For the world assembled in there, this is the final proof of Burghard's greatness: his "modern family arrangements." A man of genuine stature, who had handled his daughter's coming-out with the composure of a man of the world.

But I also see how little the two women speak to each other. In the trial, Wiebke had represented the opposing side. She had wielded the scalpel of justice against the man who had invited her to dinner only the previous November. What stands between the two women now, I don't know. I suspect they don't quite know either.

My gaze moves across the gathering. Something is missing. I look for the "ladies' brigade" – those highly gifted young physicians whom Burghard had mentored over the years. He had liked to adorn himself with them, had presented them in interviews as evidence of his feminist progress. But today not one of them is here. Not a single one.

His "reverence for the tissue" – his favorite phrase – was not a professional ethos but, as I understand now, an instrument of domination. He demanded deference to the material and always meant himself. He had not advanced the careers of these women; he had fitted them into his order until they could no longer breathe. Dr. Aris had only been the first to dare to break open the cage. The others had quietly vanished – into the pharmaceutical industry, into administration, into other cities. Their absence was their verdict.

I take some empty glasses, carry them to the kitchen, and close the door behind me.

I look again at the empty tureen. The porcelain is cold. I filled it every day with soup – beef broth with root vegetables, chicken soup with noodles, clear consommé. I carried it to the dining room, set it on the table, lifted the lid. The steam rose and filled the room with the smell of food, of life.

Burghard usually let his portion go cold. He would stare at the tureen with a mixture of revulsion and hunger, then hold forth about his structural principles or sink into his thoughts. The food I offered him he did not refuse – that would have required an explanation, a statement about himself that he was not capable of. He let it stand until it was cold, and said nothing.

I remember moving into this villa, in 1987. Isabel had still been there at the beginning. She had plans. She wanted wild gardens, soft rugs, a house that breathes. But she died shortly after the purchase, in the middle of the renovation. Burghard did not simply ignore her vision; after her death he systematically erased it. He halted the work in progress, dismissed the tradesmen, redesigned the rooms to his own specifications. Every curve was replaced by a straight line, every disorder overwritten with geometric rigor. What had been left unfinished remained unfinished – a house that Burghard called livable and that still never felt like a home.

I was the only one who stayed in the villa with Burghard. Beatrice moved out and went back to Munich. The shadow brother remained, filling the tureen, keeping the kitchen warm, while Burghard spent his days in the city cutting through other people's fates and his evenings in the villa's study dictating surgical reports into a voice recorder. In this villa, no one ever contradicted. That was not a virtue. It was the condition of staying.

As early as the summer of 2002, when the heat hung over the lake like a threat, I had begun secretly studying apartment listings in Munich's neighborhoods at night. I was looking for places in Haidhausen, near the large apartment where Beatrice and Wiebke lived. The villa already felt to me then like an oversized coat that had not been tailored for me. I wanted out of the smell of the pharmacy that seeped from the study.

Burghard always denied that smell. He spoke of cigar smoke and old leather, but I smelled the chemistry. Sweet, artificial, with a metallic undertone. I didn't know then what it was. I only sensed that my brother was systematically poisoning himself. Not until after his death, after the discovery in the tabernacle, did I understand the extent of it.

On that September day when the yellow letter arrived, I set the mail on the gueridon and exchanged a brief glance with Burghard before leaving the study again. That was all, at the time. Only in retrospect, when I call the moment back, do I see it: his hand on the mahogany trembled briefly, a fine, rhythmic shaking that he immediately pressed flat with his other hand. I had seen it and not seen it. I left.

What lay behind that trembling I did not learn until much later, from Beatrice's account and from the lab reports. Volaron – trade name for tilidine, an opioid that suppresses pain and destroys the body's self-perception. He took it in ever-increasing doses, several times a day, in quantities that disturbed Beatrice. Along with cortisone for his failing adrenal glands, benzodiazepines for the trembling. He sat in the courtroom, eyes open, posture erect – but he was no longer there.

Burghard had spent thirty years learning to close himself off. Did he suffer? With someone like him, you can't know. I never experienced him as a suffering person. What shakes me is something else – that a human being can dissolve so completely while life continues on its regular course, while the soup goes cold, while I close the door behind me. That no one had a chance to intervene. Not because we looked away – though we did that too – but because the control he exercised was perfect. Until it wasn't.

And no one noticed. Not the judge, not the attorneys. Not even Beatrice – though if I'm honest, I don't know what even an emergency physician would have been expected to see from several meters away. A man sitting quietly in a courtroom looks no different from one who is dying of adrenal failure.

It was only when Beatrice ran around the barrier, when she tore open his shirt and began the resuscitation, that the world understood that the great professor was not lost in thought but dying.

Three days later he was dead. Multi-organ failure, the physicians said. Addison crisis, said Beatrice. I say: he died of the impossibility of admitting that his body had betrayed him.

I imagine someone inside the salon raising a glass again. A speech beginning. The words that will come: "A great man... an irreplaceable loss... his unerring hand..."

I turn away. The façade will hold for a few more hours, until the last guest has gone. But in here, in the stillness of the unfinished villa, in the kitchen with the empty tureen, the truth has long since moved in.

My brother was no titan. He was a sick, addicted man who preferred to die rather than appear weak. And I, the shadow brother who cooked the soup and kept silent, was his quiet accomplice.

I lift the tureen from the marble counter. It is heavy, rounded, cold. I carry it to the table, set it down. Tomorrow I will pack it up for Beatrice. Tomorrow I will pick up the keys to the apartment in Haidhausen. Tomorrow begins a life in which I no longer cook for a dead man.

But today, on this February afternoon, while the world inside buries a hero, I stand in the kitchen and grieve for the brother who never was – the brother who might perhaps have been,

if Isabel had not died, if the villa had not grown so cold, if the Volaron had not censured him until nothing remained but a waxy statue in the courtroom.

Perhaps he had been that way for years – so far removed from himself that no one could have intervened anymore.

The Yellow Letter

Burghard sat at his desk studying the dust particles.

The late-summer morning light fell at a precise angle through the tall windows of his study, making them visible: dancing, geometric points following their invisible choreography of air currents – rising, descending, circling, never colliding. He had observed this phenomenon often. It confirmed what he already knew: order was not a matter of intention but of physics. The particles followed their logic, and in the same way every object in this room had its place – not by habit but by necessity.

Burghard's desk, a massive rampart of dark oak, stood exactly centered on the window axis; the shelves formed precise parallels; even the distance between the armchairs had been calculated. It was a room without accident.

On that Tuesday morning, the sixth of September 2002, this order was disturbed by a piece of cellulose. It was not a tremor, not an eruption; it was the dry sound of paper on polished walnut. Burghard's hearing was of a sharpness he prided himself on – a faculty that defied age.

Albrecht had entered through the open door. He wore a soft cashmere sweater the color of untoasted bread and moved with a quietness that Burghard interpreted, depending on his mood, as discretion or invisibility. He set the stack of letters on the gueridon, that diplomatic little walnut side table marking the boundary between the household and Burghard's refuge. Albrecht's eyes, a shade too soft for this room, moved briefly to the yellow envelope and then to his brother's face. He said nothing. In that silence lay something Burghard could not quite place – a premonition perhaps, or only Albrecht's habitual illegibility.

The irregularity with which his brother brought the mail on some days and not others produced in Burghard a quiet irritation. Perhaps Albrecht followed some system of his own, a rhythm of the kitchen that Burghard simply couldn't see through. But the thought was absurd. Albrecht lived without any discernible structure, as if order were a matter of external circumstance rather than inner logic. Despite all his incomprehension of this yielding nature, Burghard had to concede that his brother displayed a certain precision in the doing of it.

Another brief glance between the brothers, a curt nod. Then Albrecht left the study, closing the door behind him.

Burghard was alone with the yellow provocation.

He rose. The movement cost him more effort than he cared to admit. The polymyalgia stiffened the shoulders, especially in the mornings, but the Stabilizer he had already injected himself with today, and the two tablets of the Smoothing he had swallowed before breakfast, dampened the pain to a tolerable background noise. The Smoothing was already laying its silk lining over his nerves, making the world softer, less sharp.

He walked to the gueridon. It was only a few steps, but he used them, as always, to review the order of the room. The edge of the Persian rug lay exactly parallel to the baseboard. The spines of the books formed a continuous line. Everything was as it should be. Burghard's movements were measured, almost ceremonial – a deliberate slowness that expressed, he told himself, dignity.

On top of the stack lay the letter. An unclean, aggressive yellow that stood out in the room's muted palette like a foreign body. A legal signal. A formal service of process.

He took the letters and returned with them to his desk. The massive rampart of dark oak offered protection, a defensive line against any form of disturbance. Everything here was a legacy of the structure he had built after Isabel's death. He thought briefly of her attempts to bring the villa to life with soft fabrics and asymmetrical flower arrangements – a creative will that he had overwritten after her death, layer by layer, with his own geometric rigor.

He set the other envelopes aside and kept only the yellow one in his hand.

Then he took the letter opener. It was a heavy instrument of Solingen steel, forged, the blade ground on one side. He drew the cut along the upper edge of the envelope. The motion was practiced. A surgeon does not open; he creates access.

The document he removed from the envelope was the formal notice of service – the most implacable instrument of German jurisprudence. The delivery officer's handwritten notation recorded the exact moment of receipt. Inside lay the statement of claim.

Burghard read with the clinical detachment he had acquired over decades at the operating table. The lines arranged themselves before his eyes like anatomical structures.

Claimant: Dr. Arzu Aris

The name did not come as a surprise – he had sensed that this day might come – but the precision with which the allegations were framed unsettled him.

Detailed reconstruction of operative failure in the case of Elena V., June 14, 2000. Allegation of deliberate falsification of the surgical report. Defamation. Negligent bodily harm.

He read on. The statement of claim described the pancreaticojejunostomy in minute detail, the moment of the perforation, his instruction to Dr. Aris. It alleged that he had guided the needle, that he had caused the error. That was a distortion of the facts.

His gaze moved to the end of the document. There stood the name of the plaintiff's attorney.

Attorney Dr. Klaus Bergmann Bergmann & Associates, Munich

Burghard knew the name. Bergmann was an established attorney in medical law, mid-sixties, respected, expensive. That Aris could afford an attorney of this caliber surprised him. Or did Bergmann have a score to settle – with him personally, or with men like him?

A tremor began in his right hand. Fine, rhythmic, uncontrolled. The Smoothing he had taken after rising did not hold it back. He set the paper down and stared at his fingers.

Aris. A former pupil. He recalled that Beatrice had once been friends with her – an unsavory mingling of the personal and the professional that he had disapproved of even then. That this woman was now claiming he had caused the fatal hemorrhage and shifted the blame onto her, forcing her out of her profession, was more than a lie. It was a violation of the surgical order.

But in his interior, behind the strata of years of sediment and chemical dampening, something stirred. Not an image – only a splinter of one. The operating room. The smell of the open body – that sweetly metallic scent of fresh blood and bile. The pounding in his temples. The unnatural rigidity in his fingers as he guided the needle.

No.

He closed his eyes. The Smoothing laid its soft veil over the rising memory, muted it, blurred it.

It had been Aris. She had been clumsy. He had salvaged what could be salvaged.

The tremor intensified. He needed to adjust the dose. Out of strategic necessity. The yellow letter required clarity, and clarity came through control of one's own biochemistry.

He rose and went to the cigar humidor. The cabinet stood firmly recessed into the oak paneling, in the shadow of the bookcase – a masterwork of cabinetry, built from Spanish cedar, the interior lined with pale, reddish wood. Once Cohibas had been stored here, symbols of a masculine sovereignty that dissolved in smoke. Now the humidor had been repurposed. It was the external depot of his existence. He thought of it in his mind as his tabernacle, for here rested the sacraments of his daily functionality.

He opened the heavy lid. The smell of tobacco and cedar was still present, but the sweetly acrid chemistry of the drops had layered over it so completely that the two were now inseparable – a

single smell that was both and simultaneously neither anymore. Burghard's gaze moved over the contents.

On the uppermost level: emptiness. Until 2001 the testosterone vials had stood here, but he had disposed of them after retirement. He no longer needed artificial masculinity.

On the middle level: a row of brown bottles of the Censure – Volaron drops. The foremost had been opened, the pipette slightly discolored from daily use. Beside them the blister packs of the Smoothing, neatly stacked.

On the lower level: the ampoules of the Stabilizer, cortisone for injection, in sterile packaging.

In the shallow rim tray where the humidifier cartridge had once lain: the Drainage. A plastic bottle of laxative, sticky, half empty, the cap encrusted. Not among his substances but beside them – in the compartment for accessories.

Everything in its place.

He reached for the bottle of the Censure. The pipette clicked softly as he unscrewed it. Normally he took ten, twelve drops at most. Today he counted to eighteen.

He stood before the open humidor. No water, no sugar – that would have been unworthy, a concession to taste. He let the drops fall directly onto his tongue. The bitter, artificially sweet flavor spread through his mouth, corrosive and unyielding. He swallowed dry.

Then he closed the humidor, went to the window, and waited. He looked out over the villa's garden. The hedges had been cut into strict, square forms. No blossom dared to grow outside the geometry. This was his world.

After about ninety seconds the effect set in. It was as if someone were laying a warm blanket over his nervous system. The trembling in the back of his hand stopped. The sharpness of the yellow letter faded. The legal threats became mere data points in a complex equation he would solve.

He felt large again. The structure had been restored.

A knock at the door interrupted his contemplation. Albrecht entered. He carried a cup of soup on a small tray. The cup was of fine Nymphenburg porcelain, part of the same service as the large tureen in the sideboard.

"The broth is especially rich today," said Albrecht, setting the cup on the edge of the desk. The steam rose, carrying the smell of celery and beef through the room.

Burghard looked at the steaming liquid, then at his brother. The detachment of the Censure had lifted him into a sphere where such gestures of care felt intrusive. What irritated him above all

was the naivety behind it. Albrecht knew about the constipation – Burghard made no secret of it – but his brother treated it like an ordinary old man's complaint. As if something like that could be cured with broth.

"I don't need soup," said Burghard coolly. "My peristalsis is a chemical problem, not a matter of broth."

Albrecht was still for a moment. Then he took the cup back. His face remained pleasant, but he said nothing more, and the way he turned toward the door – without the usual small pause, without a backward glance – had not escaped Burghard.

It left him unmoved, however. The Censure held him at his elevated level; he felt its full lift. He was again who he needed to be.

He picked up the telephone. The sound of the keys was a sober clicking, a functional rhythm. Lohse had been a reliable expert over all these years, a useful and loyal companion. The attorney had handled the purchase of the house, later drawn up Burghard's will, and had always understood how to translate the mundane realities of life into clean legal constructs.

"Lohse? Brenner here. I've received something. Yellow. Yes. I want to speak with you."

Burghard held the receiver loosely to his ear, giving space to the calm, measured voice at the other end.

"It concerns an old matter, Lohse. A tiresome business from the past. A certain Aris. We need to discuss our course of action. Tomorrow at ten?"

He listened, nodded. "Good. Until tomorrow."

He hung up. The Censure carried him now completely. He ran a steady hand over the smooth paper of the statement of claim. The trembling was gone. The detachment had lifted him into that sphere where things resumed their form and their calculability.

Out in the hallway he heard the distant clattering of dishes. Albrecht was tidying up. Burghard smiled thinly. The world was in order again. That he had just raised his dose was not a sign of material fatigue but the necessary adjustment of a high-performance system.

He was the User. And the User had everything under control.

Lohse

The preparations began the evening before. Burghard stood before the open tabernacle and surveyed the rows of his sacraments. The appointment with Lohse the following morning required careful calibration. He could not tremble. The polymyalgia would stiffen the shoulders

– that was unavoidable, but acceptable. What he could not show was the other thing: the sluggish coordination, the swaying, the uncertainty in his legs that had nothing to do with his rheumatic condition. He had to be the professor Lohse knew – sovereign, precise, invulnerable.

The Drainage was the most urgent matter. For days he had felt the pressure in his abdomen, that agonizing fullness bloating him from within. The Censure had nearly brought his peristalsis to a standstill – that was the price of detachment. He reached for the plastic bottle with the aggressive laxative, unscrewed it, and measured out a double dose. The stuff tasted revoltingly sweet, synthetic, but it would work. It had to work.

In the morning, an hour before departure, he took the Smoothing. Two tablets, washed down with a swallow of water. He felt the soft velvet blanket settle over his nerves, felt the inner restlessness ease, felt the world grow softer. The trembling would not break through today.

The Mercedes glided through the morning traffic. Burghard sat at the wheel, both hands at ten-to-two. He always drove himself. The drive from Starnberg to Munich took forty minutes – along the highway, past Gauting, through Grünwald, then into the city. Lohse's office was in the old town, near the Odeonsplatz.

He found a parking space on a side street. The walk from there to the office was not far, barely two hundred meters. He got out. Getting out took longer than usual. His legs obeyed him only with a delay. The Smoothing made each step a conscious effort – not painful, the way the polymyalgia was, but blurred, as if the ground were farther away than expected. At the same time, yesterday's Censure was forcing his musculature into a subtle rigidity. He felt the stiffness in his trunk, in his thighs. His steps were shorter than usual.

He saw it differently. He moved with measured deliberation. He carried himself with dignity. A man of his standing did not hurry.

The stairwell smelled of floor wax. Lohse's office was on the second floor. Burghard took the stairs, not the elevator. Each step required concentration. Right hand on the railing, shift the weight, pull up. The Ativan ataxia made depth perception unreliable – the steps seemed both closer and farther away than they were.

When he reached the second floor he stopped for a moment. His breath came quickly. The brass plate on the door: Dr. jur. Ludwig Lohse – Attorney at Law.

He rang.

The secretary opened the door – gray-streaked hair, pleasant. "Professor Brenner. Good morning. Dr. Lohse is expecting you."

Burghard nodded and stepped inside.

Lohse was five years older than Burghard. When Burghard, who knew the office well, stepped through the wide-open door into Lohse's room without knocking and took his first steps into the space, the attorney jumped up from his desk and came toward him with a warm smile. He moved around a cluster of leather armchairs without breaking his stride or taking his eyes off his guest. He stopped squarely in front of Burghard, hands loose in his pockets, and studied him with a gaze that, despite the smile, was too sharp, too searching.

"Brenner. You're walking differently today," said Lohse by way of greeting. Not as a reproach. Simply as an observation.

Burghard felt the slight like a sting. He put on his mild smile. "The polymyalgia, Lohse. Mornings are the worst. And sailing in wind and weather takes its toll. The shoulders, the hips..." He made a vague gesture, as though the condition were too complex for words.

Lohse nodded, unhurried, almost offhand. "Of course. Come, sit down."

Burghard lowered himself into one of the heavy leather armchairs and extended his left leg demonstratively in front of him, as if he needed to take the weight off it.

Lohse took the armchair across from him, leaned back, and folded his hands in front of his stomach. "So. A yellow letter."

Burghard handed him the statement of claim. Lohse put on a slim pair of reading glasses and began to read. He read slowly, thoroughly. His face remained expressionless; only his eyes moved across the lines.

After a few minutes he set the document down beside him.

"Hm."

A sound, not a word. But Burghard knew that "hm." It meant: I've understood. And it's complicated.

"The statement of claim is precise," said Lohse. "Very precise. Dr. Aris claims you made an error during the operation on Elena V. That your trembling caused the perforation."

Burghard stared at his hands. They lay still on the armrests, perfectly controlled by the Smoothing. But he remembered that day in June 2000. The smell of the operating room. The pounding in his temples. The rigidity in his fingers.

"It was her error," he said. "She held the retractor under tension."

Lohse studied him for a long moment. "Burghard, this case is going to be complicated. The opposing side is aggressive. And you..." He searched for words. "You don't seem... present enough for a courtroom."

"I am perfectly fit to stand trial."

"I don't doubt that." Lohse leaned back. "I mean something else. In your villa you are the man I know. Here" – a small gesture taking in the room – "you are a different one. And in the courtroom you will be a different one again. Under pressure, without your familiar surroundings, before a judge who watches everyone." He let a pause develop. "That is the problem." Lohse set the statement of claim aside. "The plaintiff's attorney is Dr. Klaus Bergmann. Senior partner at Bergmann and Associates. We both know him. Very thorough, very experienced. He will show no mercy."

Burghard nodded curtly. Bergmann was an institution in Munich medical law. The type who doesn't attack but dismantles.

"I suggest," Lohse continued, "we bring someone in. Marek Seidel – young, sharp, and he has no reverence for white coats. His office is in Schwabing. He'll be in touch, you'll find a time."

He paused briefly, then, offhandedly, as though it had just occurred to him: "If it's easier for you, he could come to the villa. Might be more practical."

That's where you're best kept – so Burghard heard it, though Lohse had not said that. He did not register the gap between the actual words and his own translation. The Smoothing turned casualness into subtext. A polite way of saying: you're too unwell to come here. But at the same time... The villa. His refuge. His tabernacle. There he could control the dose, maintain the mask.

"Bergmann will press hard," said Lohse. "But Marek is harder."

Burghard nodded slowly. A younger attorney. A fighter. That sounded like someone who would see him as a frail old man. But if this Marek could hold his own against Bergmann...

"Very well," he said at last. "Have him get in touch."

Lohse smiled – a mild, almost paternal smile. "I'll call him today."

Burghard rose laboriously from the armchair. The getting up took longer than it should. The Smoothing made the movement sluggish, unsteady. Lohse rose as well, came around the desk – again that elastic, effortless movement that Burghard felt as a reproach. He extended his hand to Burghard.

"We'll manage this, Burghard. But you have to trust me. And you have to be honest. With yourself and with me."

Burghard took the hand, held it a moment. Lohse's grip was warm, firm.

"I am being honest, Lohse."

"Hm."

That "hm" again. Burghard released the hand and turned toward the door.

"Burghard," said Lohse quietly.

Burghard turned.

"Take care of yourself. I mean it."

Burghard nodded curtly. Then he left the room.

The walk out was an ordeal. Down the stairs, each step a conscious effort. Right hand on the railing, shift the weight, set the foot. The Ativan ataxia made depth perception unreliable.

Outside on the street he stopped for a moment. The autumn air was cool, carrying the smell of wet asphalt. He walked slowly to his car, opened the door, lowered himself behind the wheel.

Only now, in the seclusion of the Mercedes, did he allow the mask to drop. He leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. The Smoothing held the fear back, dampened it to a dull pressure. But beneath it, very deep, it was there.

You don't seem present enough.

He started the engine, drove. The drive back to Starnberg took forty minutes. When he reached the villa he parked the Mercedes exactly in the center of the gravel courtyard, parallel to the façade. He got out, climbed the three granite steps.

Inside it smelled of soup. Albrecht was cooking again. Burghard ignored it, went directly to his study, closed the door.

He stood before the tabernacle. His hands were trembling again. He opened the lid, reached for the Censure, counted the drops.

Twenty.

He let them fall on his tongue, swallowed dry. The bitter, artificially sweet taste.

Ninety seconds. Then the warmth returned, the clarity, the exaltation.

The world was in order again.

The User had everything under control.

The Symmetry

The wind came in steadily from the northwest on that October afternoon – not strong, but constant, the kind of wind that keeps the sails filled and silences the shrouds. The water of Lake Starnberg was in motion, small crowded waves breaking the light into a thousand cold splinters. A good day for sailing, by Burghard's standards.

He covered the path from the garden to the dock quickly. He hated those hundred meters along the public gravel path, the strollers with their dogs who occasionally recognized him and nodded. He nodded back, curtly, without smiling, without stopping. Beatrice and Wiebke walked behind him. When the dock came into view he quickened his pace imperceptibly.

The Symmetry lay at the far end of the dock. The name stood in gold letters at the stern – set with geometric perfection, as he had ordered it painted in 1987 when he had the boat renamed after Isabel's death. Ten meters of white fiberglass, the deck of oiled teak, the mast of anodized aluminum. It had been Isabel's father's boat, once christened with another name – a soft, poetic name that Burghard had forgotten because it was meant to be forgotten. He did not merely call himself the owner; he was the skipper. The title was for him not a nautical rank but a necessity. On this boat he was the law of physics.

He knew that Beatrice loved sailing – he had shown her her first tack, her hand on the winch, the feel of the tiller. As a child she had taken every opportunity to come along. That she had come less often in recent years he read as the natural distance of a grown woman from the rituals of childhood. That she had come today – that was a return. Perhaps she had missed sailing. He said nothing of this, but he noted it.

Before setting out he had adjusted his doses in the villa's bathroom. The pull in his back had been stronger since morning: twenty drops of the Censure. Plus three tablets of Smoothing, because his hands had trembled while he was putting on his life vest. Not weakness – a calibration. Now, with the wind in his face and the tiller in his right hand, he felt like the master of these waters. The Smoothing had laid its silk lining over his nerves; the world had assumed that soft precision in which everything was calculable.

Beatrice sat across from him in the cockpit, her forearms resting on the coaming, her gaze out over the water. Wiebke beside her, a pair of sunglasses on, her face turned to leeward. She held onto the coaming even when there was no need to. Boats were not her terrain. That Beatrice had brought her was a concession to the new element in her life, which he bore with the composure of a man of the world.

He had on a dark blue polo shirt. The Smoothing had softened the world; he had barely felt the dock beneath his feet when he cast off the lines and brought the boat out. Now he stood at the

helm and guided the Symmetry on a broad reach. He saw the maneuver before him like a drawing in an anatomy atlas, the vectors of the wind, the sail trim, the course line across the water. Everything was logical. Everything was calculable.

But he could not feel the tiller. The Censure had severed that fine feedback between his hands and the resistance of the water. He saw the boat; he did not feel it. The world was a silent film in which he played the lead without truly sensing the ground beneath his feet.

He noticed that Beatrice was watching him. Not the casual watching of a fellow sailor – her gaze clung to his hands, to the tiller, to the knuckles whitening under the pressure. For a moment that gave him pause. What did she see? He decided it was admiration. The precision of the grip, the composure, the decades of experience.

"The wind is shifting to north-northeast," he said. "We'll go about."

"The wind is lighter than you think, Burghard," said Beatrice. "If you put the helm hard over now, we'll lose steerage."

No agreement. He felt the contradiction like a sting.

"I am the skipper," he replied, without taking his eyes off the horizon.

In his mind the maneuver was clear. He could see the boat shooting through the wind, the boom swinging to the other side, cleanly, controlled. But he could not feel that the Symmetry was already losing speed, that the wind was easing from the mainsail, that the water beneath the hull was swallowing its energy.

He pushed the tiller to windward. Hard and decisively.

In the same instant an uncontrolled spasm ran through his right forearm.

The boat did not respond. The Symmetry did not shoot through the wind but stopped dead, fell into irons, her bow pinned to the wind, the sails thrashing. Then, as the wind pushed the boat to leeward, the boom swung from port to starboard – slowly at first, then with a hard, dull blow that resonated through the entire hull.

In the moment the spasm ran through his arm, something opened in him that he could not have stopped.

Operating room six. The smell of the open body – sweetly metallic, blood and bile. The needle in his right hand. And then: the rupture of the mesenteric artery. His thrust perforating it. Not Aris. Him. His needle. His trembling hand.

The blood sprayed against the sterile mask.

He stood on the boat's deck, the sail thrashing above him, and saw it. One second. Two seconds. The memory would not release him.

Then he pushed it aside. The report was correct. He had dictated it. Aris had held the retractor, Aris had not controlled the tension. He had salvaged what could be salvaged.

The boat lay in irons, the sails beating, the boom had done its damage. "Damn it!" His voice cracked. He hauled at the tiller – a trifle, he told himself, a single bad moment, the kind that could happen to anyone.

He tried to bring the boat back under way, but his sense of balance was gone. The Smoothing had extinguished his depth perception – he no longer knew where his body was in space. His left leg buckled, he swayed, reached for the winch, missed it, and would have gone over the coaming had Wiebke not grabbed him first by the belt and then by the arm and pulled him back.

"Let go of me!" He tore himself free. Wiebke stepped back.

He stood in the cockpit. His hands were shaking. The bruises on his forearms – yellowish-violet, extensive – had been there for weeks, since the cortisone had made the skin so thin that any pressure ended in silent bleeding. Where Wiebke's fingers had grabbed him there would be a new mark tomorrow.

Beatrice stood up. Without a word she stepped to the tiller and took it over with a quiet, offhand movement, as if this were simply what was done. She was silent and did not look at him. She looked only at the boat, the horizon, the course – as if he were not there.

Burghard sank onto the thwart. Here, on his boat, she was the one holding things together. His boat. His legacy. He saw Wiebke cast a brief glance at Beatrice – questioning, with a set to her mouth he could not read and did not try to.

He stared at the wake. The Censure did its work. The humiliation of the failed maneuver grew soft, subsided. The current. An unpredictable caprice of the water. He was still the skipper. He was still the master of the Symmetry.

They motored back. The diesel droned steadily, the boat rolling under engine. Burghard sat at the stern, eyes half closed. Beatrice and Wiebke sat forward in the cockpit, their heads close together, their voices lost in the engine noise. From time to time they looked back at him. Beatrice said something. Wiebke answered. They looked back again.

He turned his gaze away. Whatever they were discussing, it was beside the point. He was already planning the next move in the case against Aris. He would destroy her – not because

she was guilty, but because she reminded him of the moment when the needle in his hand had for the first time developed a will of its own.

When Beatrice brought the bow around to the dock, Burghard took the line. He would make the boat fast, as he always had. The first throw missed the cleat. The second as well. On the third the line held. He looked at his hands. The three throws had confirmed what he had known since the failed maneuver and had not wanted to know: he had lost all sense of distance. The Censure had extinguished his proprioception entirely.

He secured the second line, stepped onto the dock. The wood shifted slightly under his feet. He walked, without looking back, to the shore path.

The Women

He had instructed Albrecht to set out the oval platter. Not the tureen – soup was not appropriate this evening; soup was for convalescents, for evenings without form. This evening required form. The Nymphenburg porcelain service, the damask tablecloth, three place settings, crystal. Isabel had found the tablecloth too stiff, too formal. He had kept it all the same. It suited the villa.

Beatrice had called in the morning. "We're coming this afternoon. We need to talk to you." A statement, not a question. He answered: "I'm occupied this afternoon." – "Burghard, this is important." He let a pause develop. "You'll come for dinner. Eight o'clock." A brief silence on the line. Then from the other end, with a weariness he knew how to read: "Fine."

Since October, since the outing on the Symmetry, he had heard nothing from her – seven weeks of silence.

Now he sat in the study, the tabernacle standing open. The middle level: the row of brown bottles, the foremost already opened. The day's doses had been adjusted: ten drops of Censure at breakfast, two tablets of Smoothing after lunch, half an ampoule of Stabilizer around four o'clock, because the polymyalgia had been painfully restricting his shoulders since morning. He closed the tabernacle. He waited.

The doorbell rang at quarter to seven.

He heard Albrecht's steps, then the opening of the door. Two voices – and then, curtly, Beatrice's: "We need to speak with him, Albrecht." A moment. Then Albrecht's muffled reply, which he couldn't make out, and the steps approaching.

He did not stand up. He knew Beatrice's walk: quick, firm, the gait of a woman always ready to move to the next room. Wiebke's steps were different – even, measured. They came in.

Beatrice wore her dark work jacket, beneath it a blue-gray shirt. Wiebke was in black, simple and precise, a close-fitting blouse. At her neck lay a fine silver chain, barely visible – below it, in the neckline, something small and rounded was briefly visible. A pendant. Unusual for Wiebke, whom he had not known to wear jewelry.

"Burghard." Beatrice took a step toward him. "We're not here for dinner. We need—"

"Albrecht has cooked," he said. The Smoothing had sealed his body; rising was now a matter of will rather than motor function, and he chose to save it for the right moment. "We eat first."

"Burghard—"

He laid both hands flat on the armrests, pushed his weight forward, and stood – slowly, in the sequence he knew: press, lift, clear. The rigidity turned every act of rising into a series of individual steps. He walked ahead, without looking back, through the hallway into the dining room.

Beatrice looked at Wiebke. Wiebke returned the glance, briefly, without comment. Then they followed him.

Albrecht had laid the table: the damask cloth, the Nymphenburg porcelain service, crystal. Burghard pulled out his chair at the head of the table and sat down heavily, both hands braced on the table's edge until the seat had taken him. Wiebke took the place he had assigned her and laid her hands on the table. Her face was expressionless. Her eyes rested on the place setting.

Albrecht served in silence: smoked salmon on small plates to begin, then rack of lamb with winter vegetables. He refilled the glasses, set down the plates, noticed nothing, pretended to notice nothing. Then he disappeared. Burghard appreciated that. Albrecht knew when he was needed and when he was not.

The conversation ran. Burghard led it as he always did: he set the topics, let the others respond, listened with half an ear. He spoke about the renovation of the new surgery wing at his former clinic – "entirely misconceived, operating rooms without adequate suction capacity" – about a methodologically thin paper a colleague had delivered at the last conference. The silences between sentences were not uncomfortable.

Beatrice ate. She listened, responded occasionally. From time to time she exchanged a brief glance with Wiebke, and Wiebke answered with a small movement of the eyes or shoulders – signals he registered without being able to read them.

He noticed the chain again when Wiebke leaned slightly forward and the neckline of her blouse fell open. Something small and rounded, droplet-shaped, an iridescent patina shimmering in the light of the table lamp. No gemstone, no piece of silver. Something old.

"What are you wearing?"

Wiebke looked at him. A pause. "A pendant."

"I can see that. What kind."

"A glass object." She looked at Beatrice.

Beatrice set down her fork. He recognized in her face the decision to speak now.

"Father."

He looked at her. The word was rare enough that he had to pause.

"We are not here because of dinner. You turned it into dinner. That's all right. But we need to talk now."

He set down his glass. "Then talk."

But it was Wiebke who spoke. He would have expected Beatrice as the messenger, the buffer. But Wiebke looked at him directly, and her voice was calm, without anger, almost offhand – the voice of a woman reading out facts.

"Burghard, I am taking on Bergmann's case. I will represent Dr. Arzu Aris before the Munich Regional Court."

He was silent. The clock on the wall kept its service.

He knew about Bergmann's stroke. October, a Friday, Lohse had called him: "Bergmann is out. Stroke. Right-side paralysis, aphasia. No more practice." Burghard had hung up and thought: that changes nothing. The firm would reassign the case, to someone else, to anyone. He had not thought further.

He should have thought further.

He looked at Beatrice. She sat upright, hands in her lap, looking at him equally. No evasion.

"You knew," he said.

"Yes."

"You agreed to it."

"Yes."

He leaned back, as far as the chair and his rigidity allowed. He said nothing. The silence was not a weighing – it was as if something in him were searching for language and finding none. Aris

had turned against him. Now Wiebke. A student he had mentored; and now a woman he had welcomed into his family.

"My life is in perfectly good order."

Beatrice was almost over him before he had finished: "It is not."

Wiebke did not speak. She sat, hands on the table, and looked at him. He found her gaze uncomfortable because he could read nothing in it. No triumph, no apology, no hostility. Only attention.

"Aris contacted me directly," she said at last, "as did the colleague handling Bergmann's cases. I have already read the surgical report from June 2000."

"Of course." He nodded, coolly. "The report."

"It has inconsistencies. You will know that."

He reached for his glass. "My attorney will be in touch."

"Burghard." Beatrice's voice. Firm, without an edge. "I need to say something else now."

"Beatrice—"

"I'm not finished."

He closed his mouth.

She spoke without interruption. Her voice stayed clinically clear, without pity and without anger – that was the hardest part, he found. Anger he could have assigned a place. This composure was a different category.

"Wiebke and I have talked a great deal in recent weeks. About you as well. About what I have been seeing for years, and have said nothing about, because I am not your physician but your daughter, and above all because you would not have wanted to hear it. I'm changing that now."

He moved his fingers on the edge of the table. The Censure lay like a cloth over his nerve endings; he felt the edge but not its temperature.

"I'm looking at your skin. For at least two years now. The bruising on your forearms – yellowish-violet, spreading, without any traumatic cause. That's not from rheumatism. That comes from long-term cortisone therapy that breaks down the collagen fibers and weakens the capillaries until any pressure ends in silent bleeding." A pause. "Your adrenal glands have not produced their own cortisol for years. You know that. You know the pathophysiology. You are dependent on external supply. Your body can no longer regulate itself."

He said nothing.

"Your gait is ataxic. I've been seeing it for years. Not the polymyalgia – that causes stiffness and pain, but not ataxia. This is a benzodiazepine. Regular, high-dose, to the point where cerebellar coordination is permanently impaired. You brace yourself against doorframes. You lose your balance on level ground."

"That's the polymyalgia. The hips—"

"No." No hesitation. "It isn't."

He raised his chin.

"And your movements are rigid. Not arthritic – mechanical. Opioid rigidity. The stiffness that develops when you take opioids long enough and at high enough doses that the musculature loses its normal suppleness. You reach for things and can't feel how hard you're gripping. I saw it when we were sailing. The maneuver. You couldn't feel what the tiller was telling you."

Wiebke sat still. She looked at the table. A form of tact, he thought; he hated her for it all the same.

"These are not signs of age," said Beatrice. "This is a polypharmacological pattern. Cortisone, benzodiazepines, opioids. For years, self-prescribed, daily. You have systematically kept yourself functional while wearing down systems you cannot replace."

"I am a physician," he said. His voice was colder than he intended. "I know my body."

"You know bodies. Yours, no longer." She looked at him, longer than was comfortable. "That is the paradox. You have spent your entire life looking into other people's interiors and blocking out your own. That is not a criticism. It is a diagnosis."

The red wine shimmered in his glass. He drank, slowly, and waited for the warmth of the Censure, which was still working, deep and reliable.

"And what do you want to do with all this?" he asked. "Have me committed? That would be legally interesting, Wiebke, given that you are simultaneously my opponent."

"I don't want anything with it," said Wiebke. "That is Beatrice's matter."

"It is my matter."

"Yes," said Beatrice. "Until it isn't." He waited for more. She did not give it.

Instead she looked at Wiebke, and Wiebke reached to her neck and drew the silver chain slightly forward. The small rounded object became visible, suspended in the light of the table lamp. It

shimmered. Iridescent patina, silver and gold and a trace of blue, shifting with the light, as if the glass were alive from within.

"Do you know what that is?" asked Beatrice.

He examined it. Thimble-sized, droplet-shaped. Ancient glass, he could see at once – the patina was not silver coating but glass corrosion, centuries in the ground, what specialists call glass disease. A small opening at the top. A vessel for something precious.

He did not know what it was. He should have known, he sensed, but he did not.

"A lachrymatory," said Beatrice. "A Roman tear vessel. About two thousand years old. They were used to collect the tears of the mourning and place them in the grave with the deceased." No sentimentality in her voice – she was describing a finding. "Mother found it at an antique dealer's. In the early eighties. Among larger, more valuable things. She put it on the windowsill in her room, where the light made it glow."

He sat still.

"You once told me it was worthless corroded glass. You didn't understand why she kept it."

He remembered the irritation at the time: Isabel's tendency to find meaning in small, useless objects. Asymmetrical flower arrangements. A handful of pebbles she had brought back from the shore. A tarnished piece of glass on the windowsill.

"When she died," said Beatrice, "you sorted through her things. Albrecht rescued the lachrymatory. Quietly. He took it and gave it to me. He said: this mattered to your mother." A pause. "I kept it. And when it was clear that Wiebke would take on the case, I gave it to her. In this house, tears were never permitted. But tears are reliable testimony. They are the only form of evidence that cannot be dictated."

He let the sentence pass through him. Albrecht had taken it. Albrecht, who always kept quiet, who always cooked, who was always there and claimed nothing for himself – Albrecht had carried something out of the villa that he had considered finished.

"That," he said, his voice very quiet, "is none of her concern." He looked at Wiebke. "Isabel belonged to this family. You do not."

"Wiebke belongs to me," said Beatrice. "Which means she belongs to the family."

"You bring the lachrymatory here" – the Censure did not quite contain the heat of the sentence – "and give her my dead wife's property to use against me."

"It stands for what Aris is fighting for."

"Aris is fighting for money."

"Aris is fighting for her career," said Beatrice. "Which she would not have lost if—" She stopped.

He looked at her. "If?"

She was silent. Her gaze did not waver.

"If what, Beatrice?"

"That is a matter for the court," said Wiebke. Her tone was impeccably neutral.

He stood up.

Not quickly. He laid both hands flat on the table's edge, pushed his weight forward, straightened his legs. The rigidity turned every transition of movement into a sequential task he worked through: press, lift, clear, stand. He stood. He stayed close enough to the table that he could have reached for it.

"Dinner is over."

Beatrice did not move. "We haven't finished talking."

"I have finished talking." He put the magnitude into his voice that his body no longer supplied. "You've said what you wanted to say. Made diagnoses you have no right to make. You are my daughter, Beatrice. Not my physician."

"I am your daughter and I am a physician."

"In this house you are my daughter. As long as I am standing here." He looked at Wiebke. "And you come to my table wearing my dead wife's property as a signal. This is not a legal matter. This is a question of taste. And loyalty."

Wiebke stood up. Without haste: she pushed back her chair, stood, straightened her jacket. The lachrymatory disappeared beneath the fabric of her blouse.

"Burghard," she said, "I understand your reaction." Not as a conciliation. As a statement of fact. "The proceedings will continue."

"The proceedings interest me. Your participation in them does not."

Beatrice stood up as well. He looked at her: the narrow shoulders, the straight back, the gaze without appeal. She looked the way Isabel had sometimes looked – a thought he put away at once.

"I'll come again," she said. "When you want to talk."

"I know where you live."

They left. He heard the front door, the closing. Then the villa was as it always was: geometric and cold and still.

He remained at the table a while longer, standing. The standing cost him; he felt the fatigue in his hips, the slight dizziness the Smoothing sometimes left when he had been upright too long. He reached for the back of the chair, considered sitting, decided against it.

He walked slowly. When he reached his study a hand slid along the paneling – not because he needed the contact, he knew every step in this room – but because the floor seemed to have opinions of its own this evening. He opened the tabernacle, the middle level, the row of brown bottles. The foremost.

He did not count the drops. He let them fall – more than prescribed, more than he had permitted himself. The bitter, synthetic taste on his tongue, then the familiar warmth coming from within, as always, as reliably.

He closed the tabernacle and sank into his armchair – the heavy leather chair behind the desk, with the high backrest that held him upright even when he no longer did it himself.

The warmth worked. The edges of the evening grew softer. Beatrice's voice, Wiebke's eyes, the small iridescent glass that had lain in the neckline of her blouse – everything lost its sharpness. He thought: Albrecht took it. He thought: worthless scrap.

He thought: Isabel put it on the windowsill, where the light made it glow.

Then he thought of nothing more, because the Censure was doing its work.

Marek

The doses were higher than before the visit to Lohse. Three tablets of Smoothing instead of two. Twenty-five drops of Censure. He was still counting, but he no longer asked himself why: out of control or out of habit. Ninety seconds. Then the warmth.

Then the Stabilizer as well. The needle slid in, barely perceptible – his skin offered no resistance anymore.

He dressed with particular care. Dark jacket, white shirt, tie. In the mirror: a mask of Carrara marble. The features motionless, the eyes glassily clear. Good.

Albrecht had prepared the study. The Persian rug precisely aligned; on the small table between the leather armchairs, cups and a pot of espresso, steaming. Burghard sat down behind his

desk. Not in the visitor's chairs – that would have sent the wrong signal. He was the department chief. Marek was the employee. The hierarchy had to be visible.

At eleven o'clock the doorbell rang.

Young. That was Burghard's first thought when Marek entered. Early thirties, narrow face, sharp eyes. Jeans and a slim-cut blazer – not even a suit. Burghard registered this with cold disapproval. Disrespect. Or calculation. Either was unacceptable.

Then he watched Marek's nose move almost imperceptibly – a brief, reflex twitch at the first breath inside the study. He could smell the chemistry. Of course. Burghard knew the smell himself: floor wax, old leather, and beneath it, underlying everything, the synthetic undertone of the medications. He had grown accustomed to it. Marek had not. The young man would draw his conclusions – wrong conclusions, like everyone who saw the surface and did not grasp the necessity behind it.

"Professor." Marek was already in motion, already halfway into the room before Burghard had reacted.

Burghard rose – the Smoothing made the coordination sluggish, the sequence of pressing and clearing – and extended his hand. Marek's grip was firm, brief, without warmth. Not a handshake but an acknowledgment.

"Sit down, Marek," he said, gesturing toward one of the leather armchairs. His voice sounded deep, though even he could hear the minimal lag in his articulation, a faint blurring of the consonants. "It has taken a long time to arrange this meeting."

"Yes." Marek sat down, simultaneously pulled the notebook from his blazer, set it on the table – a single fluid motion. He opened it without looking at Burghard. "I had suggested we meet at my office. Several times. But you canceled the appointments."

Burghard heard the words. He understood what they meant. But he found nothing behind them – no memory of an appointment, no cancellation, no reason that could be attached to anything. He reached back into the preceding weeks the way you reach for an object you have set down securely: a familiar drawer, known, within easy reach. The drawer was empty. There were no appointments he had canceled – not because he hadn't canceled them, but because the weeks themselves had grown diffuse, run together, transformed by the Censure into a uniform mass in which individual events had lost their outlines.

He waited to see if something would come. Nothing came.

The Censure overrode the uncertainty. Irrelevant. The attorney is mistaken, or he is testing. Neither requires a response.

"I prefer the villa," said Burghard smoothly. "This is where I am most productive. Consider it for what it is: a monument to precision. Everything here has a structure. So does the truth."

Marek looked at him. Briefly, appraisingly. Then back to the notebook. "Fine," he said. No interest in the structure.

He slid the surgical report across the desk. No preamble, no niceties. "Let's go through the Elena V. case. It says here: 'Preparation of the pancreatic anastomosis by the operating surgeon.' Those are your words, Professor. You dictated the report yourself."

Burghard took the sheet. He read his own sentences, which he had spoken into the voice recorder years ago like a gospel. For a moment the smell of the operative field rose in his nostrils – sweetly metallic, blood and bile, the acrid undertone of the electrocautery. He missed that smell. It was the only reality in which he had never had cause to doubt. Against it, the air in the villa was empty.

"A report," said Burghard, weighing each word, "is the technical summary of a truth that remains invisible to laypeople. When I dictate that I prepared, I mean the guidance. Aris guided the hand. I set the direction. That she perforated the mesenteric artery at the critical moment was a failure of her fine motor control. I dealt with the wreckage afterward."

The words came as if memorized. Not because he had rehearsed them – although he had, for days, in front of the mirror – but because the chemical mask no longer permitted him any spontaneity. He spoke like an actor who had played his role too many times.

Marek was making notes without looking up. "Dr. Aris cites your habilitation thesis of 1975 in her claim. She alleges you guided the scalpel yourself, to show her how to work under ischemia."

Burghard stiffened. The irony hit him like a physical blow. His work from 1975 – suture healing under ischemia. He had devoted his life to researching tissue resistance, the art of preserving structures threatened by breakdown. And now the cortisone with which he stabilized himself daily was destroying precisely those structures – in himself: the collagen fibers holding the skin together, the capillaries that ruptured at the slightest pressure. The bruising on his arms was the visual echo of the problem whose solution he had sought in 1975: tissue that cannot withstand pressure. His body was running the experiments on itself that he had once conducted on rats and dogs.

"My research," he said with icy composure, "was groundbreaking. I mentored generations of women physicians, opened the way for them. The ladies' brigade – have you heard of it?"

"Lohse mentioned it." Marek wrote, without commenting on the phrase. "Was Dr. Aris one of them?"

"The most gifted. I gave her opportunities she would never have had without me. And this is how she thanks me." He paused, stared at the report. "The report documents the mechanical stress load from the assistant. That is the truth."

He spoke the sentences he had spoken a hundred times – to himself, in the mirror, now to Marek. They had once sounded like certainty. Now he could hear the repetition itself, the effort behind it. He was speaking against something without being able to name what it was.

Marek set down his pen. For the first time since the conversation began. He leaned back, arms loose, and looked directly at Burghard.

"Professor. I'm going to tell you what we have and what we don't. So we don't waste each other's time."

Burghard nodded.

"What we don't have: a story Hoffmann can't attack. She's good, and the report has gaps she will find." He held a pause – not long, just long enough. "What we have is more than Lohse has probably told you."

He leaned forward, picked up his pen again, tapped it on the notebook – once, twice, a rhythm.

"First: Hoffmann herself. She is your daughter's partner. That is not an abstract conflict of interest – it is a documentable personal entanglement. I will file a motion for recusal. That delays the proceedings, forces Aris to find new counsel or to publicly justify Hoffmann's involvement. Either way it costs her time and momentum."

Burghard registered this. He opened his mouth, but Marek was already continuing.

"Second: the chain of causation. Elena V. had pancreatic head carcinoma – a primary condition that can itself lead to polyneuropathy. The direct causal link between the tear and the loss of her playing ability is not as clear-cut as Hoffmann will argue. That is a field where we need a counter-expert – someone who will stand before the court and say: multifactorial damage, not clearly attributable."

Burghard tried to follow. The first point – recusal, Hoffmann – had been clear enough, had even produced something like satisfaction in him. But now, at the second – chain of causation, polyneuropathy, multifactorial – he was losing the thread. Not because the terms were unfamiliar: he knew them all, had used them himself, countless times. But they slid through his consciousness without finding purchase, like water over glass.

"And third," said Marek, "the question of timing. Between June 2000 and September 2002 there are two years. What did Aris do during that time? Did she file an internal complaint? Use the clinic's internal reporting channels? Two years of silence is a line of attack."

He closed the notebook. A clean conclusion, like the end of an argument. "As for the procedural sequence: the judge will hear you as a party to the action. No oath – this is civil, not—"

"Witness," said Burghard.

Marek stopped. "I beg your pardon?"

"You said witness."

"I said party." Marek looked at him. "They're not the same thing. A party to the action is civil procedure. A witness is something else entirely. You are not being called as a witness – you are a party."

"I understood you perfectly." Burghard's voice took on a coldness he intended as precision. "My hearing is impeccable. It always has been. In the operating room I could hear the nurses whispering at the far end while others had to ask the anesthesiologist to repeat himself."

"Professor—"

"I am a witness. I will testify to what I observed. The report will confirm—"

"You are not being called as a witness." Marek's voice remained measured, without impatience – the composure of a man correcting a misunderstanding for the second time, making it seem as though he had barely noticed he was repeating himself. "In civil proceedings there is no testimonial examination of a party in the criminal law sense. You will be heard as a party. That is procedurally distinct. Waldmann will not put you under oath. But what you say will be weighed."

Burghard was silent. The distinction between party and witness – he knew it, of course he knew it. But in the moment Marek had spoken, something in him had read the word differently. As if the brain had taken a shortcut that turned off in the wrong direction. He sat and waited for the irritation to resolve.

It did not resolve entirely.

"I am a witness," he said again, more quietly now, no longer as a correction but as a statement to himself.

"You are a party to this action," said Marek. He reopened the notebook without comment. Made a note. Burghard did not look at him.

"Professor." Marek leaned forward one last time. "Wiebke Hoffmann. Your daughter's partner is representing the claimant. The court will notice this constellation. So will I."

"She is not my daughter's partner in any formal sense," said Burghard sharply. "My daughter is not in a registered partnership. Wiebke is a companion. I have welcomed her into the family. I am generous and modern." He gave a short laugh, dry and bitter. "And now she is attacking my structure. She doesn't want the law. She wants patricide."

"You call it patricide?"

"What else? Beatrice has allied herself with the enemy. Wiebke is an ideologue. She sees in me the patriarchy she wants to destroy. The truth means nothing to her. This is about power."

Marek was silent. He made no notes. He looked at Burghard – attentive, without comment.

"I will do what I can, Professor," he said at last. "But consider this: a trial is like an exploratory laparotomy. You open up, and then you find what the preliminary examination didn't show."

He stood up, closed the notebook, pocketed his pen. Three gestures, simultaneous.

When Marek left, Burghard remained sitting at his desk. He heard Albrecht's steps in the hallway, the muffled voices, the front door. Then he stood up – slowly, with his hand on the desk's edge – and went to the window.

The gravel drive in front of the villa lay in the December light, pale and precise. Marek was below, getting in, pulling the door shut. But he did not drive off. Burghard watched him hold the telephone to his ear.

He could hear nothing. He saw the movement of the lips behind the side window, the short pauses while Marek listened. Once Marek glanced up at the façade – briefly, appraisingly. Then the telephone again.

After Marek started the engine and drove away, Burghard remained at the window a moment longer. He felt victorious. He had explained the truth to Marek – his truth, the technical truth of the report. And Marek had fought back. The recusal motion. Wiebke being pushed onto the defensive. That was the image that remained.

That it was probably Lohse whom Marek had called, he registered. That it could mean nothing good, he registered as well. But the Censure smoothed that thought too, filed it under: irrelevant. Professional communication between attorneys. Part of the structure.

He turned from the window. Went to the tabernacle. The key slid into the lock. He reached for the foremost bottle, no longer counting. Twenty drops. Thirty. It made no difference.

The warmth returned. The clarity. The exaltation.

The User had everything under control.

The Isolation

The villa was a mausoleum of symmetry. Time did not flow within it; it stalled, invisibly, in the corners of the rooms, in the joints between the floorboards, in the pauses between Burghard's breaths. Since the dinner – November, had it been November? – he had not left the property. The outside world, with its imprecise moral demands and the encroaching justice system, had become a distant noise he simply shut out by locking the heavy oak door of his study.

Albrecht was sorting in the cellar. Burghard could hear him sometimes – the scraping of cardboard boxes over limestone, the rustling of old paper. When he caught him coming up from the cellar, Albrecht justified his activities as "clearing out," a cleansing of the foundation. But Burghard knew: Albrecht was preparing his escape. Every sealed box was a quiet farewell to the tyranny of geometry. A small apartment in Haidhausen. Beatrice had mentioned it once, in passing. Near her place. The betrayal was complete.

The days blurred. Burghard sat in his armchair, surrounded by the structure of his books and his desk, the tabernacle and the Persian rug. He looked at the furnishings and saw there not merely furniture but the materialized substance of his career. He remembered how this villa had been paid for: the countless private patient premium fees, the exorbitant rates for expert opinions in which his name beneath the document carried more weight than the findings themselves, and the discreet consulting fees from the pharmaceutical industry. It was the gold of the great incisions.

The great incisions. The classical era. When you were still in up to the wrist in the operative field, when you felt the resistance of the tissue and your own exhaustion was the price of precision. Today – this bloodless, minimally invasive technique, peering through keyholes and manipulating robotic arms. Video games. No longer surgery. No longer craft.

Earlier he would have... what? Earlier.

The thought broke apart. Led nowhere.

One morning – which morning? January? February? – Burghard stood in the bathroom. The light from the two lamps fell on his face without mercy. The mirror was large, frameless, cold. He had removed his shirt. The movements had taken longer than they should. The buttons. Where were his fingers? He could barely feel them.

The skin stretched over his ribs like parchment paper. Extensive bruising covered his entire torso, blue-violet islands on skin grown so thin that the tissue beneath showed through. A map of interior dying, spreading across his chest, across his shoulders.

He stood and examined it. He knew what he was seeing. He had spent his life reading tissue – other people's tissue, under light, on the table. This was not other people's tissue.

Then the floor moved – not the floor, his balance – a brief, soundless tilt, and his hands found the edge of the washbasin. He held on. The porcelain was cold beneath his fingers. He felt the cold, but not the surface, not the edge, not the pressure of his own grip.

He looked in the mirror. He looked at the bruising.

"Cortisone," he said.

A single word. Aloud, into the empty room. It tasted like ash.

Then he was silent. He put his shirt back on, button by button, and left the bathroom.

He walked through the hallway to the study, slowly, one hand occasionally at the wall. Albrecht was nowhere to be seen. The villa held its breath. He sat down behind the desk, sat motionless for a moment, then stood again and went to the tabernacle.

The key. Where was the key? His hands found it. The lock. The door opened.

The ampoules. The blisters. The drops. The sticky plastic bottle.

He reached for the Stabilizer. The cortisone ampoule. For the blood pressure. For the adrenal glands. The dead adrenal glands. He knew it. Deep within him he knew: the adrenal glands were producing nothing anymore. He was substituting. Replacing. Preserving himself.

The Smoothing. Three tablets. No, four. Push back the fear. The guilt. The truth. Press it all down. Soften the world. Make it bearable.

The Censure. The brown bottle. He read the lettering on the label, mechanically, as always. Volaron. Vol-. And then, unbidden, the other thing: *volare, cantare* – he shook his head, but the fragment of earworm would not be shaken loose, that stupid melody Isabel used to hum at the window, doing the dishes, when they were sailing. *Nel blu, dipinto di blu.* He detested that song. He let the drops fall. Too many. It made no difference.

The Drainage. Triple dose.

He took everything in the order he knew, at the intervals he knew – not haphazardly, but without consideration anymore, without the calculation that had once stood behind it. Earlier

he had balanced the doses against the day's demands: Marek at eleven, so Censure at nine, Smoothing at seven. Now there were no demands. Only the tabernacle emptying itself, and the next day coming.

The tabernacle. His sanctuary. Had become the cabinet of a junkie.

He was no longer the User. He was the subject of a failed experiment.

In the isolation – how many days had it been now? – he admitted it to himself for the first time.

He had not sacrificed Elena V. out of hatred for Aris. He did not feel enough for the young woman to hate her. He had done it to protect the structure of his reputation. A single error. A documented trembling. The entire edifice of his legend would have come down.

The falsification of the report had not been a criminal act. In his own reckoning. It had been a necessary correction of reality. To maintain the order of the system. A god of surgery was not permitted to tremble. The hand was the extension of the divine will.

But reality was now striking back biochemically.

His thoughts drifted to Beatrice. The rage was heavier than the ischemia, weightier than anything else in this room. He was furious with her. Not because she had become an emergency physician. But because she had withdrawn – from his house, his order, his plans for her. And now this: Wiebke representing the claimant. That was no coincidence. That was Beatrice. She had arranged it, had set Wiebke on him, had made the case possible. A conspiracy. They wanted to strip him of his authority, drive him from the villa, break his structure. To transfer him into some "managed preservation."

The Symmetry lay in the harbor. Unused. Frozen in the ice. The boat was called Symmetry. Symmetry. Order. Earlier Isabel had... no. Don't think of Isabel. Isabel was dead. The villa was cold. The symmetry was...

The thought broke apart.

The twentieth of February. The date circled in his mind. How many days left? Ten? Nine?

The User preserves himself for the twentieth of February – the structure must hold until then – only until then –

Isabel at the window. The lachrymatory in her hand. She had put it on the windowsill where the light made it glow. He had said: worthless scrap. She had looked at him without answering, with the expression he had never been able to read and had never wanted to read. Now, in the warmth of the Censure, he tried. He did not get far. The image dissolved.

– cortisone Ativan tilidine – the sacraments in the tabernacle – tired – so tired – but nine more days – only nine –

The Symmetry. The boat. Symmetry. Order.

He stood up. Did not sink – stood, with both hands on the desk's edge, the weight forward, working through the sequence: press, lift, clear. Stand. He waited until the dizziness settled. Then he walked to the armchair. Lowered himself in, slowly, controlled, until the backrest took him.

Outside it had begun to rain. A gray, imprecise veil dissolving the contours of the garden.

He closed his eyes. He dreamed of the smell of the operative field. Of the metallic ring of the clamps. Of a world in which he was still the one who made the incisions.

In the villa it was so quiet you could hear the ticking of the clock in the hallway.

Nine more days until the twentieth of February. Eight more.

The Trial

Marek picked him up at seven.

The SUV stood on the gravel drive, engine running, when Burghard opened the front door. Albrecht waited in the hallway, holding the coat ready. Getting dressed had taken longer than planned – the tie, the buttons, the sequence of gestures that had once been automatic and now represented a series of individual decisions. He had calibrated his doses since the evening before with the trial in mind: Stabilizer in the early morning, Smoothing with the water, Censure after breakfast, which he had not been able to eat.

Marek sat behind the wheel and did not get out. Albrecht went ahead, opened the rear door, took Burghard's arm as he had to lift himself into the high vehicle. Burghard stiffened. "Don't." Albrecht did not let go. Burghard allowed it, without looking at him.

He sat. Albrecht closed the door, took the other rear seat. Marek drove off.

On the highway Marek sat with his fingers loose on the steering wheel, but his jaw was set. He asked no questions. Burghard looked out the window, watched the trees, the guardrails, the fields in the gray February light. The Stabilizer was working. The Smoothing was working. He was ready.

"You remember the strategy," said Marek. No question mark.

"Yes."

"The polymyalgia accounts for the motor findings the opposing side will raise. Witnesses may describe your gait disturbance, your bracing yourself. We address it before Hoffmann does: the condition is documented, the cortisone use is medically indicated, the limitations are real and have a legitimate cause. We take that out of Hoffmann's hands."

Burghard nodded. That was clear.

"The ladies' brigade," said Marek. "Your mentorship of women in surgery. That is character evidence. A man who has spent decades promoting women physicians does not act with malicious intent against an assistant. That is the second line."

"Correct."

"The report is the third. We hold the report."

Marek was silent for a moment. Then, without taking his eyes off the road: "If you feel tired or dizzy, tell me immediately. At the first sign."

Burghard looked at him. Marek drove, eyes straight ahead. It was not an offer; it was an instruction. Burghard did not answer.

At the Munich Regional Court – a heavy building from the Wilhelmine era, classical pilasters, sandstone-colored façade, tall symmetrical windows – journalists had gathered on the steps. Cameras on tripods, waiting figures. Marek parked, got out. Albrecht was already at the passenger door. Marek let him be.

They walked up the steps. Nine steps. Burghard counted them. The journalists called out questions, but the words did not reach him. Only sound. Only noise.

The preparation room was small, functionally furnished. A table, chairs, a window looking onto the inner courtyard. Marek laid out his papers.

"Waldmann is conducting the hearing himself. He questions the parties directly. When he asks you something, answer directly, concisely, stay with the report. Don't add anything that wasn't asked."

"Understood."

"And regarding the opposing side: Hoffmann is still officially representing Aris. The recusal motion was denied – the court saw no sufficient grounds. She will be in the courtroom."

Burghard said nothing.

"And, Professor." Marek looked at him, with the gaze that registered everything and commented on nothing. "You are a party today. Not a witness. That is not a semantic distinction. As a party you will be heard, not sworn in. The court will make this clear. If Waldmann addresses you as 'the defendant,' do not correct him."

Burghard wanted to ask why he would need to correct anyone. The question did not form. The Smoothing made every thought that threatened to grow complex into something smoother, simpler. He nodded.

At eight forty-five they went into the courtroom.

The courtroom was a tall room with a coffered wood ceiling, classical pilasters along the walls, and tall narrow windows casting long bars of February light across the wooden floor. At the front, on the raised dais, the judge's bench held its position. Below it, at floor level, the tables of the parties – from the presiding judge's perspective, the claimant's table to the left, the defendant's to the right.

Burghard saw her immediately.

Wiebke sat on the left side, beside Dr. Aris. She wore a black robe, beneath it a white blouse; at the collar of the blouse, just below the jugular notch, something small and rounded hung on a fine chain. He recognized it. Of course he recognized it.

To his right: Marek, already organizing his documents.

Burghard looked to the left, into the public gallery. Beatrice. Albrecht. Beatrice sat upright, hands in her lap. Albrecht sat beside her, shoulders slightly forward, hands around a folded coat. He looked old. Older than Burghard remembered him. Beatrice looked at Burghard, nodded – a minimal nod, clinical, without warmth, without forgiveness.

Burghard looked away.

He saw Aris only from the corner of his eye. Small, in a gray suit, hunched over her papers.

At nine o'clock Judge Dr. Ernst Waldmann entered the courtroom.

Everyone rose.

Waldmann was in his late sixties, a lean man with sharp features and rimless glasses. He sat down, arranged the file with deliberate, symmetrical movements, laid his fountain pen to the right of it, parallel to the table's edge.

"Please be seated." His voice was calm, neutral. "The hearing is now in session. Case number 9 O 12847/02, Dr. Arzu Aris versus Professor Dr. Burghard Brenner."

He read out the statement of claim. The words flowed over Burghard. Damages. Defamation. Negligence. Section 823 of the Civil Code. Then Marek's response: polymyalgia rheumatica, documented since 1975. Motor limitations attributable to the condition. Decades of mentorship of women surgeons as character evidence. The surgical report as objective basis. Marek argued the case precisely, without emphasis.

Waldmann listened, took notes. Asked no questions.

At nine forty-five he announced the order of evidence. Hearing of the parties. Dr. Aris first, then Professor Brenner. Reading of the medical documents and expert opinions.

Dr. Aris was heard first.

She straightened up, hands folded before her on the table. She did not look toward Burghard, not toward Wiebke. Only toward Waldmann.

Waldmann began the examination. Calm, methodical.

"Dr. Aris, please describe the course of the operation on June 14, 2000."

She began to speak. Quietly, haltingly, but precisely. The operating room. The patient. The pancreaticojejunostomy. The critical moment.

"I held the retractor as Professor Brenner had instructed. He guided the needle. I saw..." She stopped, drew breath. "I saw his hand jerk. Only for a second. But the needle went too deep."

Burghard sat motionless. The tilidine rigidity held him like a vise. He heard the words. He did not let them through.

"How did the defendant respond?"

"He turned to me and said: 'The retractor. You're holding too much tension. You're tearing apart the architecture of my suture line.' I... I didn't contradict him. I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of him. He was the professor. I was the assistant. If I had contradicted him..." Her voice broke. "You don't contradict. Not there. Not him. You learn that in the first week."

Marek rose. "Objection, Your Honor. The claimant is making generalizations about clinic structures that are not within the scope of her personal observation."

Waldmann: "Overruled. The claimant is describing the context of her decision. Continue, Dr. Aris."

She nodded. "After the operation he dictated the report. 'Mechanical stress load from the assistant.' That was not an accurate account of what occurred."

"Did you object at the time?"

"No."

"Why not?"

A long pause. Then, quietly: "Because I thought he would correct it himself. I thought he was... a man who corrects things."

Waldmann waited. He looked at Wiebke. "Can someone find a tissue for the claimant?"

Wiebke opened her briefcase and handed one to Aris without any change of expression.

The examination continued for another fifty minutes. Waldmann pressed, precisely, without aggression. At eleven fifteen Aris was excused. She returned to her place, exhausted, slumped.

"Fifteen minutes recess."

Marek led Burghard to the preparation room. When Marek stepped out briefly, Burghard reached into his inside pocket. The brown bottle.

He unscrewed it, tilted his head back. The drops fell onto his tongue. He did not count. The bitter sweetness. Then he waited. The warmth. The clarity. The detachment.

When Marek returned, Burghard was sitting at the table, hands folded.

At eleven thirty the defendant was called for hearing.

Burghard sat up. Hands on the armrests, weight forward, ready for the familiar sequence.

"Professor Brenner," Waldmann began, "as the defendant in this matter you are now being heard—"

"I have been called as a witness," said Burghard.

A brief silence.

Waldmann looked at him. Then at Marek. Marek rose, lightly. "Your Honor, if I may briefly clarify—"

"That won't be necessary." Waldmann turned back to Burghard. "Professor Brenner, you are a party to these proceedings, not a witness. The hearing of a party is legally distinct from the examination of a witness. Your attorney will explain the details after the session." No impatience, no sharpness. A statement of fact.

Burghard opened his mouth. Closed it again. The Smoothing turned the objection that wanted to rise into something smooth, formless. Irrelevant. He nodded.

"Professor Brenner, describe the course of the operation on June 14, 2000."

Burghard spoke. The words came as if memorized.

"The operation proceeded as planned. The assistant was insufficiently focused at the critical phase. I prepared the anastomosis, directed the sequence. The mechanical stress load from the assistant led to compromise of the suture line. I dealt with the situation."

"Dr. Aris claims your hand jerked."

"My hand did not tremble. The surgeon's hands are the extension of his training. My training was the finest this country was capable of producing at that time."

"You suffer from polymyalgia rheumatica. Did this condition affect your fine motor function on the day of the operation?"

"The polymyalgia affects the shoulders, the pelvic girdle musculature. Not the hands. The report documents the facts correctly."

Waldmann made a note. Set down his fountain pen. Looked at Burghard for a moment longer than before.

"Professor Brenner, do you take medication?"

Pause.

"Hydrocortisone. For the polymyalgia. Medically indicated, documented for years."

"Other preparations?"

Pause.

"No."

Waldmann looked at him. He made no note.

"Describe your relationship to Dr. Aris before the incident."

"I mentored her. She was the most gifted assistant of her cohort. I gave her opportunities that surgery at that time would not have opened to her through her own efforts alone. That was nothing I did under any external compulsion. That was my conviction."

"And afterward?"

"I offered her a position in the clinic administration. A consequence of my assessment of her fitness for operative work. Not a punishment. A redirection."

Waldmann let the sentence stand. Then: "You have spoken in your testimony of the surgeon's hands. As the extension of his training. How would you describe the moment in which such a hand fails?"

"The surgeon's hand does not fail."

"That was not my question."

The sentences no longer came the way he had known them to – finished, ready to hand, in the right order. Somewhere between thinking and speaking they lost their form. The Censure held the surface smooth, but behind it – somewhere behind the velvet veil of the Smoothing – something was moving that he could not name. A shift. A giving way.

"If a hand fails," he said at last, very slowly, "it is due to the assistance. To external factors. The hand itself is the last thing to give."

"A god of surgery," he said then, without being asked. "The god is not permitted to tremble."

Waldmann did not raise his eyebrows. He made no note. He sat motionless for a moment, then: "You use the word god."

"It is a figure of speech."

"What kind?"

Burghard opened his mouth. The answer did not come. The sentence he had meant to say had vanished somewhere between thinking and speaking. He felt the film of perspiration on his forehead. His blood pressure. He could no longer feel it the way he had once been able to – as a

reliable background voice of the body, always present, always calibratable. He felt only that something was missing.

"The report," he said. "The report is the figure. It documents the truth."

Waldmann looked at him. Then he made a note.

The lunch recess.

Marek brought Burghard to the preparation room, set water on the table, did not ask whether he wanted to eat. He knew the answer.

"That went well," said Burghard. "Waldmann didn't challenge the substance of the report. He was looking for peripheral matters."

Marek looked at him. Said nothing.

"The thing about God. I should have left that out. But that was the only misstep."

"Professor." Marek set the glass of water in front of him. "Waldmann makes notes. He always makes notes. What he doesn't note, he notes anyway." He sat down. "This afternoon will be longer than the morning."

Burghard heard it. He registered the tone, the pause before it. But the Censure turned the warning into something soft and distant – a sentence that arrived somewhere and took hold nowhere.

When Marek briefly stepped out, Burghard reached into his inside pocket. The brown bottle. He let the drops fall. Forty. More. He lost count somewhere between thirty and forty, began again. It made no difference.

He sat motionless. The white wall. The windowsill. The light falling through the grating of the inner courtyard window, geometric and cold.

At one forty-five the hearing resumed.

Waldmann began with the reading of the documentary evidence. The surgical report. The medical expert opinions. The scrub nurse's statement. The patient file of Elena V. The anesthesiologist's witness statement, submitted in writing, read out by the clerk of the court.

Marek read out in turn: excerpts from the 1975 habilitation thesis, the personnel files of the women physicians Burghard had mentored, the character references, the documentation of the polymyalgia diagnosis.

Waldmann listened. He did not interrupt.

The hours stretched. Burghard sat at the defendant's table, hands on the armrests, the mask intact. But what the mask did not show: the body was working against him. The Addison crisis is not a collapse but a slow sinking – a biochemical yielding that builds over hours, invisibly, until it can no longer be stopped. Already during the lunch recess the cortisol had not been sufficient; the adrenal glands, led into atrophy over years, produced nothing. No endogenous cortisol, no counterregulation. Blood pressure began to fall. Electrolytes shifted. The brain received only what it was still capable of receiving.

The tilidine rigidity held him upright. The lorazepam dampened every panic response before it reached the surface. He sat like a man who is listening. Only Waldmann, who glanced at him every twenty minutes, registered the trembling Burghard was trying to suppress. The beads of perspiration on his forehead. The way his eyes lost focus and then – with visible effort – retrieved it.

At two thirty Burghard lost the thread of what was being read out. He waited for the sentence to re-order itself. It did not. He waited further.

At three ten he heard Albrecht's name in a document – some document, he could no longer say which one. Albrecht. He looked into the public gallery. Albrecht sat with the folded coat on his knees. Beatrice beside him, upright.

He looked away again.

At four thirty Waldmann set down the last page of the last document.

"Professor Brenner, do you wish to make a closing statement regarding the evidence that has been read?"

Silence.

"Professor Brenner?"

Marek straightened, then leaned to the side. "Professor?"

He touched the shoulder. No reaction. He touched it harder – and felt beneath it no tension, no weight of a living body holding itself against the pressure. Only mass.

"I think..." He heard himself speaking without having intended to. "He's not responding."

It was said quietly, almost only to himself. But the courtroom had gone silent, and everyone had heard it.

From the public gallery – a movement. Beatrice. Already on her feet, moving through the side opening of the barrier, crossing the courtroom to him.

Her hands at his neck. The pulse – threadlike, shallow, but there.

"He is crashing." Into the room, loud and clear. "Circulatory shock. Someone calls emergency services now. One-one-two. And a defibrillator – there must be one in the building, entrance area or hallway."

She heard Marek already on the phone. Someone else – the court clerk – ran out.

"Help me." She looked to Marek – he held the phone to his ear, nodded to her. A court officer stepped forward, came around the table. Together they lifted Burghard from the chair, let him slide in a controlled descent to the floor, onto his back. Beatrice tore open his collar, opened the jacket. Beneath it the parchment-thin skin, the mottled bruising, the wasted trunk. She raised his legs, propped them against the chair. Venous return. She controlled the airway, tilted the head back slightly.

At his lips: foamy, pink-tinged secretion. She saw it and knew immediately what it meant.

"Keep the airway clear." To herself, to the air, to no one. His breathing was shallow, gurgling, with a wet undertone rising from deep in the lungs. No instrument needed to hear it.

She knelt beside him, two fingers at his neck, counting the pulse. Held the head in position. Waited for the paramedics.

Waldmann had risen. He stood at the judge's bench, hands folded, watching. He waited until it was clear that Beatrice was running the situation, that the courtroom was not descending into panic. Then, in his customary tone:

"The session is adjourned."

Wiebke stood at the claimant's table. She had not moved. The small rounded glass beneath her neckline – she held it with two fingers, pressing it against her skin. Her face was expressionless.

Albrecht stood in the front row, where he had sat throughout. The folded coat still in his hands. He looked at Wiebke's hand holding the glass. Then he watched Beatrice work. He said nothing.

In the sixth minute the pulse stopped.

Beatrice began immediately. She interlaced her hands, placed the heel of her palm on the sternum, straightened her arms and pressed – five, six centimeters deep, with the full weight of

her upper body. Thirty times, fast, hard. The ribs yielded, as they always yield. That was not a sign to stop. She gave two rescue breaths, wiping the secretion from his lips with the back of her hand as she did, went back into position. Thirty. Two. Thirty. Two. The rhythm from hundreds of night shifts; her body knew it without counting. She worked without looking up, without stopping.

When the court clerk returned with the defibrillator, she opened his shirt further, attached the electrodes to the parchment-thin skin. The device analyzed. No shockable rhythm. She did not remove the electrodes, went back into position, continued pressing.

The paramedics arrived in the twelfth minute. Beatrice handed over in a few sentences: age, working diagnosis, measures taken, the pink-tinged secretion. The paramedics exchanged a glance, nodded.

She stepped back and let them take over.p

As they lifted Burghard onto the stretcher, carried him through the courtroom, past the benches, out through the tall classical doorways, his face was relaxed. The mask had held. Until the end it had held.

Behind it: what was left.

The Disposal

The hospital smelled different from the villa, though both were governed by chemistry. In the villa the smell of medications had always been concealed beneath layers of floor wax, old leather, and the sharp fragrance of Spanish cedar – a hermetic secret for which no one had ever found a language, because the silence of this family made no exceptions. Here, in the intensive care unit, the clinical reality was unclothed. It smelled of sharp alcohol and disinfectant, of the lukewarm plastic of ventilator tubing and IV bags, of filtered, climate-controlled air without season.

I sat on a chair in the corridor, hands in the pockets of my cardigan. It was the twenty-first of February. Outside it was raining.

Beatrice came toward me. She was wearing her white coat, but it did not sit on her the way it had always sat on Burghard – like armor. On her it was work clothes. In her hand she held a stack of papers – the lab reports from the first hours after his admission, the results of the toxicological workup, the blood gas analyses.

"Albrecht," she said quietly and sat down beside me. Her face was pale, emptied out, the way a face looks after hours of work when you have long since stopped keeping track of the time. "It's all here. In black and white."

She spread the sheets across her knees. I understood little of the tables and curves, but I understood the tone of her voice. It was the tone of an autopsy, even though my brother was still being ventilated at the end of the corridor.

"The Addison crisis in the courtroom was only the tip," she said, her finger moving down the columns of figures. "His cortisol level was at zero. He had completely shut down his adrenal glands over years through exogenous cortisone. The organ withdrew – stopped producing, because the supply from outside seemed secure. When the stress of the hearing drove the demand to extremes and he could no longer increase the dose, the system collapsed. And on top of that the pulmonary edema – the pink-tinged secretion we saw in the courtroom. His lungs were already flooded before his circulation gave out." She pointed to another curve. "The opioid levels are astronomical. Volaron, in increasing doses over at least two years. And the lorazepam..." She paused. "He was taking lorazepam the way other people take breath mints."

I looked at the papers, then through the corridor window at the gray Munich winter sky.

"I knew, Beatrice," I said. My voice sounded strange in my own ears. "Not the way you can read it there. But I heard him. At night, in the bathroom. The cursing when the needle wouldn't go in. The labored breathing when he shut himself in the study. I found the empty ampoules in the trash when I took the bins out. Sometimes he would stand at the window for minutes at a time – probably after an injection – completely still, his gaze on the lake. There was one evening when he hadn't noticed me in the doorway and he was speaking aloud to himself: he called these states his flights. He looked at the water as if he could see something the rest of us couldn't." I was silent for a moment. "I said nothing. Someone should have said something."

Beatrice laid a hand on my arm. "Neither did I. I saw the bruising, the ataxia, the rigidity. I named it – in my head, as a physician – and then set it aside. He was a department chief. I assumed he could assess what he was putting himself through." She ran her thumb along one of the curves. "That was convenient. And wrong." A brief pause. "He treated himself the way he treated his own operative field. As if a body were not a living thing but something you keep open, stabilized, running."

I was quiet for a moment. Then: "He knew, Beatrice. That the surgical report was false. That it was he who had perforated the artery, not Aris."

"How do you know that?"

"Once he was sitting in the study speaking aloud to himself – he hadn't noticed me in the doorway. He said: symmetry demands its sacrifices. I left without saying anything." I looked at the papers. "He didn't falsify the report to be wicked. He falsified it because he believed that his own legend was more important than another person's career."

Beatrice stared at the reports. A long pause. Then, quietly, almost matter-of-factly: "His feminism. His magnanimity about my coming-out, his genial acceptance of Wiebke. It was all just another stone in the façade. He didn't mentor me because he loved me. He mentored me because I made him shine. He didn't accept Wiebke because he liked her or respected her as a person, but because she was a trophy of his modernity. Until the case came."

She stood up. "Come with me, Albrecht."

On the morning of the twenty-third of February, shortly after three o'clock, Burghard Brenner died of multi-organ failure. The heart, the kidneys, finally the brain. Too long without adequate circulation. The machines had done what machines can do, and then that too was over.

I sat with him. Not because we had been close – that would have been a lie he himself would have despised. But because no one should die alone, not even a man who had spent thirty years working at it.

The physician said a few brief words. Beatrice nodded. Wiebke, who had been waiting in the hallway, closed her eyes.

Two days later I drove to the villa alone.

The house still smelled of him. Of floor wax and old leather, and beneath that, barely perceptible but unmistakable, of the sweet chemistry that seemed to seep from the walls of the study.

I went directly to the tabernacle.

The cigar humidor, firmly recessed into the oak paneling, was locked as always. I had long known that the key lay in the right desk drawer. I retrieved it, fitted it into the lock. The door opened.

It no longer smelled of tobacco. It smelled of chemistry and of death.

Beatrice had given me a yellow plastic bag of the kind used in the intensive care unit for medical waste. I began to pack the contents of the tabernacle into it. The cortisone ampoules – the Stabilizer, as he had called them – cold, the packaging sterile and indifferent. The blister packs of

lorazepam, the Smoothing, half empty. The brown bottle of Volaron, the Censure, the label worn from many touches. The sticky plastic bottle of laxative, the Drainage. Everything.

I counted nothing. I conducted no inventory. Nor did I make a ceremony of it.

The clattering of glass on plastic filled the room, and then the cabinet was empty.

I sealed the bag. In my hands I held thirty years of a carefully constructed lie. The piece of furniture that had served Burghard as the altar of his sovereignty stood open, empty, without function. A wooden cabinet.

I wiped the interior with a cloth. Put the humidor key back in the desk drawer – for whoever came after us. Then I took the bag and left the study.

Outside I pulled the front door shut behind me.

It was my last service to my brother. The disposal of the lie.

In my jacket pocket lay another key. Smaller, lighter. It belonged to an apartment in Haidhausen.

The Lachrymatory

The verdict became final at eleven thirty.

Waldmann had pronounced it in two sentences, without emphasis, without a pause before it. The claim was granted in its entirety. The costs of the proceedings were to be borne by the estate. Then he had closed the file, set down his fountain pen, and risen.

Wiebke had listened. She had taken no notes.

It was March. The light of the early afternoon lay on the steps of the courthouse, thin and bright, without warmth. As the three women came through the portal they stopped simultaneously – no agreement, only the shared impulse to breathe once. Albrecht stepped out a moment later, stopped a little to one side. The air smelled of wet stone and of March. Aris stood with her shoulders slightly forward, her hands deep in her coat pockets. She said nothing. That was right.

Wiebke still held the judgment in her hand. She felt the weight of the paper, which had none. Then she reached to her neck.

The chain was warm. The glass beneath it was too – it had lain against her skin since November, had taken on her temperature. She drew it out and held it in the light. The iridescent patina shimmered, silver and gold and a trace of blue, as always, as every time she had taken it out and looked at it and put it away again.

She thought of Beatrice, who had given it to her. Of Isabel, who had found it. Of Albrecht, who had rescued it. Of Burghard, who had called it worthless scrap.

She thought of Aris, who stood beside her and was silent.

She reached behind her neck and opened the clasp. The glass lay for a moment in her palm – light, barely perceptible. Then she opened her hand.

The glass fell three steps down. The sound was barely audible – a bright, dry chime, like a fingernail touching a windowpane. Then silence.

The fragments lay in the light and shimmered.

Aris looked at Wiebke. Wiebke looked at the fragments. A long second in which nothing needed to be said and nothing was said. Albrecht also looked at the fragments. He said nothing.

Beatrice was already at the foot of the steps when the glass struck. She knelt down and gathered up the largest pieces. Carefully, with both hands.

She put them in her jacket pocket.

Wiebke watched. She said nothing. There was nothing to say: the glass had done its work, and now it was broken, and that was right, and Beatrice would carry the fragments home and put them on a windowsill where the morning light would fall through them, and that too was right.

Aris was still standing beside Wiebke. After a while she said quietly, without looking at her: "Thank you."

Wiebke nodded.

Then Wiebke and Aris walked down the steps. Beatrice waited for them, one hand in her jacket pocket where the fragments lay. Albrecht followed them, a half-step back – the way he used to walk behind Beatrice when she was a child and ran on ahead. The March air was cold and clear, and the street in front of the courthouse was empty, and somewhere a streetcar ran, and life went on as it always goes on, indifferent and unstoppable and without regard for what had just come to an end.

Epilogue

The ceasing-to-be of a person is not soundless. It has the sound of bubble wrap and packing tape.

I sat on a sealed moving box in the entrance hall and watched what my brother had called his life being broken down into manageable brown cartons. The movers moved through the rooms

with the pleasant indifference of men who have packed up many lives. They carried out the heavy oak cabinets, the desk, the display cases, the shelves. Each of their steps echoed in the rooms that had grown bare.

Behind the façade there was nothing. No ghost of the professor, no tangible essence from thirty years of surgical legend. Only the sweetly chemical smell from the study, which had settled into the walls over the years and now, with the furniture gone and the surface stripped away, was the only thing that remained.

The movers left the tabernacle untouched. It was built in; you could not have removed it without damage, and no one wanted to give that instruction. It remained in the wall, empty. A sepulcher. I had taken the key from the desk drawer and left it in the lock of the wooden doors – for no one. Then I left without looking back. No gesture. No ceremony. That had been Burghard's business, not mine.

Beatrice and Wiebke moved through the rooms like two women assessing the usability of what remains after a tremor. They did not live their lives happily because of Burghard's supposed tolerance but in spite of his appropriation of them. That had only now become completely clear to me. His support for Beatrice's coming-out, his genial magnanimity toward Wiebke – all of it only further stones in the façade. Political maneuvers. When Wiebke took the case, the magnanimity went out like a light.

Wiebke stood at the window of the study, looking out at the lake. She said nothing. But in her eyes lay something I had rarely seen there: stillness. No residue of struggle.

I did not need to ask. I had been there.

Dr. Aris would not return to the operating room. That was the truth no rehabilitation could erase. Three years had been cut out of her biography, and no verdict sutured them back in. But she was free. That was more than she had when Burghard was alive.

Beatrice came from the kitchen. In her hands she held the tureen.

She carried it with both hands in front of her abdomen, the way you hold a child you cannot yet see – supported at the sides, carefully, as if the body already knows how it is done. She looked at me.

"I'm taking it," she said. No question, no request for permission. A statement of fact. "I know," I said. She nodded briefly, as if that settled everything. Then she paused. "The apartment has room. For the tureen. And for a room that will be waiting for you."

I smiled. "A tureen this size needs guests."

Beatrice looked at me. Something in her face opened slowly. "Then come as a guest. And someday perhaps as more." She said it offhandedly, her eyes on the tureen. "We'll need you, Albrecht."

On the last day I went to the dock.

The Symmetry lay in the water, moored, in good condition – I had looked after her through the winter, as always, as I had for years. The white hull mirrored itself in the still water of Lake Starnberg. The name was still at the stern, gold letters, set with geometric perfection.

Beatrice stepped beside me.

For a while we stood in silence. The lake was still, the light thin and bright, the way it is in March on Lake Starnberg.

"I'll keep the name," said Beatrice at last. "But when the wind shifts, I'll make the tack."

I understood. Not the symmetry of control. The symmetry of balance.

She would take the boat her father had stolen from her mother and bring it back to where it had always belonged: on the water, in the wind, without a skipper.

I nodded.

"Wiebke isn't much of a sailor yet," said Beatrice. A small smile.

"Isabel wasn't either," I said. "At first."

Beatrice looked at me. Then she briefly laid a hand on my arm – the same gesture with which she had touched me in the hospital. A hand that knows what it is doing.

I drove to Haidhausen, to my new apartment.

The villa was too large for a shadow, I had told Beatrice, and it had been the truth. For thirty years I had lived in a house that did not see me. I had cooked soup that went cold. Washed porcelain that no one used. That had been my trace in that house: care that ran into emptiness.

Now water was boiling in my kitchen. No Nymphenburg porcelain, no tureen – that was at Beatrice's, where it belonged. Only a simple pot, celery and soup greens on the shelf, and the apartment smelled of my own life, and that was enough.

Outside the window the park was beginning to turn green.

Distinction

A note on dialect: The characters in this novella speak German. Nadine speaks with the accent of the Ruhr, a post-industrial working-class region in western Germany; in moments of concentration she suppresses it, and in moments of emotion it returns. Christoph speaks with a Franconian accent from the Fürth/Nuremberg area of Bavaria. To give English-language readers a sense of these registers without imposing false equivalences, the translation uses broadly analogous British regional accents as proxies — imperfect by necessity, and not intended as literal geographic substitutions.

Prologue

The German National Academic Foundation funds, by its own account, students of exceptional ability and civic engagement across all disciplines and social backgrounds. Admission is preceded by nomination; those nominated undergo a multi-day selection process in which applicants are expected to demonstrate intellectual flexibility, strength of character, and the capacity for productive engagement with disciplines outside their own. The Foundation holds to the conviction that talent is not a privilege of origin. Those admitted receive, in addition to financial support, access to further programmes — among them multi-day Scholars' Conferences held at rotating venues, at which funded students from different disciplines and year groups are brought into contact with one another. The aim is interdisciplinary networking and the fostering of academic and personal exchange. Attendance is voluntary. Costs are covered by the Foundation.

In the spring of 2005, the autumn of 2005, and the spring of 2006, those attending these conferences included, among others, a Romance languages student from Herne and a doctoral candidate in sociology from Fürth. They met at the first of these three gatherings. Some twenty years later, the Romance languages student — by then an employee of a travel agency in

Bochum — contacted the doctoral candidate in sociology — by then a professor at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. She sent him a brief email. He replied.

What followed is not the subject of this report.

1

He saw the message on a Wednesday morning in October, between two seminar preparations and a reminder from the examinations office he had already left unanswered twice. The sender was an address he didn't recognise. The subject line blank.

Hi Christoph — I don't know if you remember me. I was at the Scholars' Conferences too, mid-2000s. Göttingen and then Weimar twice, I think, or was it Erfurt. I was thinking about it recently, I won't say why exactly. Will you write back?

N.

He read the message twice. Then he got up, went to the kitchen — he was working from home that day, Claudia was in her study at the end of the upstairs hall — made coffee, came back and read it a third time.

Afterwards he sat at his desk a while longer. The annexe was quiet — the heavy door closed, the manuscript waiting on the screen. He didn't open it.

The annexe had originally been a guest suite, and you could still tell: too much space for a single workstation, too carefully finished for a purely functional room, with a bathroom next door that Claudia called the office bathroom and never used. He rarely had guests. The room was entirely his, without qualification, and he had furnished it the way someone furnishes a space when furnishing is not a priority: the desk was the same one he'd had as a doctoral student, a wide, deep piece in pale wood that had moved with him from flat to flat and ended up here because it was still the best desk he knew. Claudia had ordered the shelving to match. The armchair in the corner he had put there at some point for doctoral students who came occasionally — it didn't suit the room, too soft and too low for the atmosphere of a study, and when no one was visiting, books piled up on it.

Christoph simply sat, hands flat on the desktop, one on either side of the keyboard. This rarely happened to him, sitting without purpose. He noticed it, without knowing what to do with the noticing.

The sender address didn't contain a name. The N at the end was not an initial he could immediately place — there had been several women from that time whose names began with N, or so he told himself. The cursor hovered over the reply field for a while. He didn't touch it.

Then he wrote: *Of course I remember. Write and tell me how you are. Or call, if you like.* He added his number and sent the message before he could read back the tone of that last sentence.

She called two days later.

It was in the evening. Claudia had retreated to her study after dinner — door shut, headphones on, that was her way, and his inability to reach her on those evenings was not a loss but an extension of his own working time. He was standing in the kitchen waiting for the pasta water. He hadn't eaten much since breakfast and wanted something — pasta, because it was quick. The kitchen had been designed for other things, the pale stone worktops, the island, the window above the sink so wide it commanded the room. He used what he needed of it.

The unknown number appeared on the screen, he answered, and the voice he heard he recognised immediately — that was the first thing that surprised him, not the voice itself but that it was still the same. Deeper perhaps, with a smokiness he couldn't place. But then there was something else, something he hadn't steered and couldn't immediately account for: a response that came before his mind did, physical, as though part of him had already answered before he knew what to.

He stood at the sink and listened, and the pasta water boiled over, and he didn't move.

They spoke for an hour and twenty minutes. At some point a door opened upstairs, then footsteps on the stairs — the harp staircase, which made a sound the architect hadn't intended, a sound he knew so well he only heard it when he didn't want to — then Claudia came through the kitchen, saw the pot, pulled it off the hob, gave him a brief look and disappeared again. He made an apologetic gesture in her direction, though she was already gone.

Afterwards he went to the annexe and sat at his desk. He looked out of the window, though there was not much to see outside, the garden lay in darkness, only, a little further, on the neighbouring plot, lit from within, the Gräßel house, which he knew without ever having been inside it, clean lines, a great deal of glass, the light falling outward as though that were simply the natural state of things. He looked towards it for a while without seeing it.

The next morning he took from the left-hand drawer of his desk the earbuds he had bought for train journeys and conferences — expensive enough that he had hesitated over the purchase, good enough that he had forgotten the hesitation — and set them beside his phone. He told himself it was practical: Claudia wouldn't hear anything if he took calls in the study. That was true. It was not the only reason. The other reason had to do with the way the voice came

through the earbuds — direct, without the slight remove of the loudspeaker, as though it were addressed to him personally and not spoken into a room.

The three Scholars' Conferences lay, when Christoph counted back, nearly twenty years in the past. The first had been in Göttingen, the second and third in Weimar — or one of them in Erfurt, he was no longer sure, and he found it worth noting that Nadine was equally unsure: as though the imprecision, not the memory, were something important they shared.

He had been a doctoral student then, in his second year, working on a dissertation about social reproduction in academic fields. Nadine had been reading Romance languages, with a focus on Italian.

He had seen her before he heard her. That had stayed with him as a detail without significance that had lodged itself anyway.

She had been the last speaker of the morning — the break had already been announced, part of the audience was already restless for the lunch buffet. He sat in the fourth row, the programme on his lap, unread. He saw her as she walked to the front — and what he saw was not her face, that came later, when she was standing at the lectern, but her gait, and then, as she slipped off her sandals beneath the lectern with the offhandedness of someone who always did this, as though this were her room, her feet. The left foot rested half on the discarded shoe, so that the arch became visible — an unusually high arch, catching the light from the side and describing a line, precise and entirely unintended.

He looked down at the programme. Then he looked back.

She began to speak, and he heard her voice for the first time, and what he heard was not simply a content being carried by a voice. The voice itself had a texture — warm, slightly rough, with an energy that didn't let up, that carried through every sentence, and he felt this in a region of his attention that had nothing to do with hermeneutics or metre. And then there was something else: the way her sentences ended. They ended high, lightly, with an invisible extension — not the intonation of a woman who, out of uncertainty, frames her own statements as questions, but something else, something geographical, the melody of a place he knew without knowing it. The sentences opened at the end, as though they still had something in mind. That held him. It was not the content that held him first. It was the melody.

She spoke quickly when she was sure of herself, and on this subject she was sure. The subject was metre in Italian lyric poetry, with Leopardi at the centre, and after two minutes she began to quote, without announcement and without glancing at her notes: *Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle* — and then she stopped, her hand briefly raised, as though the gesture might

summon the rest. It didn't come. A small pause, in which the room waited. Then, from a different direction, the final line, which came to her because it always comes: *e 'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.* She laughed briefly, because the path between them had gone.

Then came the moment he didn't forget. She was speaking about the *piede* as a metrical unit — the verse foot, the smallest rhythmic cell of the poem — and the word fell several times, in Italian, precisely used, with the ease of someone for whom the language was not merely borrowed. *Il piede metrico. I piedi dell'endecasillabo.* She raised her hand briefly as she spoke, a fleeting gesture of enthusiasm, and Christoph saw the hand and the foot beneath the lectern simultaneously and heard the word, and what was happening in him at that moment was not expressible in words, and was not especially complex.

He was the only person in the room who fully understood what she was saying. He was aware of this — and the awareness had its own quality, a quiet satisfaction that was not for her alone but also for him, as the one who could see and hear and place what she was doing.

He watched her at the lectern — the energy that needed no protection, that said directly what it meant, without the built-in retreats he knew from others — and there was something in this bearing he couldn't immediately grasp. Not the clarity of the argument, not the quality of the source work. But the fire behind it. She had worked for this, he could tell — Leopardi was not an inheritance that had simply been there for her, but something fought for, something that genuinely meant something to her because she had not always had it. In his world he knew fire, but it was always a tended fire, one that kept its distance from itself. This was different. This simply burned, without knowing it was burning.

He held onto that impression without pursuing it. It was a mood, not a thought.

After the talk — the buffet opened, the room emptied — he waited until most people had gone. Then he got up and walked to the front. He didn't ask himself why.

She had put her sandals back on and was still sorting papers when he came up to her. She looked up, and this was the first time he saw her face close up — open, cheeks slightly flushed from speaking, eyes still carrying the energy of the talk.

She asked what he worked on. He explained, more briefly than usual. She nodded — and then, before he could continue, she said: *I met a man in Florence once who claimed you could read the class structure of a city from the way people drink their coffee. Whether that's true I don't know. But ever since, I always watch how someone holds their espresso.*

He laughed. He still remembered that he had laughed.

Afterwards he tried briefly to say something about his dissertation project — about the question of how educational systems reproduce social origin rather than overcome it. She listened, nodded, and then said: *Right, and Leopardi is actually a rather good example for that question, if you look at how he's been received* — and the conversation was back with her, back with her subject, with what preoccupied her. He noticed this, said nothing, listened. He also noticed how she looked at him when he responded: not curious about the answer, but animated by the fact that he was responding, that he was taking up the thought. That was not yet a pattern for him, only a detail that lodged itself.

They talked about Leopardi. About *L'infinito*, about the idea of *naufragare* — of sinking, which in Leopardi is not failure but a form of understanding. She quoted again, her eyes briefly closed, as though reading from an inner page. Her pronunciation was good, nearly accent-free, with the right rhythm.

He had spent two years in Tuscany, after his school-leaving exams — Florence, Siena, half a year in Pisa. His parents had arranged it, and it had happened, if only just: his father had a difficult dispute with a client behind him at the time, a legal claim arising from promises the design couldn't sustain — that was his way of winning commissions, and sometimes his way of losing them. His mother had insisted, though, and the stay had happened. He had gone in the way he assumed was natural, because he had known no other conditions — such periods abroad were education in his family, not holidays, they belonged to things like books that simply lay around. He knew Leopardi. But differently from her — calmer, at a remove. With her, there was no distance between the poem and herself.

Allora, he had said. *L'infinito. One of the shortest poems in world literature and fei one of the finest.*

She had looked at him. *Is that — is that Bavarian?*

He shook his head slightly. *Franconian. Fürth. Sounds related, but it's net.* He said this with the ease of someone who had given this explanation many times.

She tilted her head. *Still sounds nice,* she said.

He didn't answer at once.

That's something, he said then.

The *-ng* in his words — not the clipped stop of the standard language, but something that hung in the air a moment longer, a small resonance before the sound resolved — she heard this, and she thought something about it that he couldn't see and that she didn't tell him.

His pause before answering had been thought. His voice, when it fell — and it fell, clear and without the rise she knew from others — sounded like finality, like something that admitted no doubt. She read it as depth. That was the first misreading, and it held for nearly twenty years.

Soon after their first phone call — nearly two decades after Göttingen, as though time had folded without warning — they moved to video calls. He sat for these in his study in the annexe, with the earbuds in, the door ajar, for the room was quiet enough as it was.

The piece of furniture she sat on was, as he came to understand after a while, a two-seater — not quite a sofa, more a chaise longue that hadn't quite decided what it was, asymmetric, one side with a high back, the other lower. Terracotta-coloured upholstery, wooden legs, the tablet propped against the lower back like a small lectern. She sat across it, feet on the seat, hands free. On screen the terracotta read richer than it did in reality, sometimes almost red, and the high back formed the background for everything she said. To the right of it, slightly out of focus, a bookshelf that wasn't quite full. When a gesture went too far, the image shifted, and you could briefly see more of the room — a coffee table, a lamp, the end of a large sofa — before the frame settled again.

He had thought at first that this was its own small room, her refuge, a niche with a purpose beyond sitting. The two-seater stood at an angle, as though deliberately positioned, the colour decisive in some way. That it was a single piece of furniture that stood at an angle because it had never found a proper place, he didn't see. Nadine hadn't corrected him. She called the two-seater her boudoir when she was in a good mood, and the misreading suited her better than the truth.

He liked her hands. And her feet, when they came into frame — which wasn't always the case, the angle of the tablet sometimes allowed it and sometimes didn't — you could see them on the seat, on the terracotta fabric, the arch at the angle that sitting produced. Once he told her she wasn't well centred for the camera, and she shifted the tablet, and for a moment the angle was better. That worked sometimes.

What kept him was not only the conversation. He would have been dishonest with himself to claim otherwise. The subjects were interesting, sometimes. But the voice — through the earbuds directly, without the ambient quality of the room in which he had first heard her speak in Göttingen, without the warmth of the room that had surrounded them later that night — the voice arrived differently now: no mediation, no distance, just the voice itself, as though it were addressed to him alone and not spoken into a space. The sentences ended high, reaching for something, and that reaching came straight to his ear. Warm, slightly rough, with an unruly

energy. He listened and told himself it was the conversation. That was true. It was not the complete answer.

In March he went to Düsseldorf. He had invented a conference commitment for Friday, one that was in fact taking place the following day — the lie was a half-lie, which he took to be a form of precision, though he knew that wasn't quite right.

On the train he had a paper on his lap that he'd been meaning to revise for three weeks. He read the first page. Then he put it in his bag.

He thought, briefly and without arriving anywhere, of a sentence from a paper he had written himself, in the year of his doctorate, on idealisation as a social practice: *One loves what one has been expected to love, shaped by the coordinates of the milieu in which the expectation arose.* He had thought well of the sentence at the time.

He didn't find it very helpful now.

Nadine had chosen the hotel. He sat in the bar and waited. The room was quiet, the light slightly too bright for the dark wood panelling and the leather seating.

Then Nadine came through the door, and he stood up, and the sentence disappeared, and everything else disappeared too, and he heard her voice, and that was the only thing that mattered.

2

The enquiry came at quarter past ten, by email, from a Mr Kettner in Witten who wanted to take his wife to Puglia in May, two weeks, he'd heard it was more beautiful than Tuscany, was that right.

Puglia was right, with qualifications. Nadine opened the system, entered the details, looked at what was available, began to compose the reply — straightforward, friendly, with the two or three specific points that showed you had actually read the enquiry and weren't simply sending a template. Puglia was lovely, yes, different from Tuscany, wilder, less crowded in May, the coast more accessible in the south than the north, she could suggest three hotels, various categories.

Outside it was October, grey and undecided.

The colleague beside her was on the phone. The printer was making the noise it had been making for weeks, just before it claimed there was a paper jam. There was no paper jam. There

was a more fundamental problem that everyone knew about and no one had fixed. The colleague sighed.

Nadine sent the reply. Opened the next enquiry.

Christoph's name had simply come to her one evening in September, for no reason, the way names sometimes come. She was sitting on her terracotta two-seater, the tablet on her lap, and had googled him before she'd thought about whether she wanted to.

Prof. Dr. Christoph Baumgärtner, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Chair of Sociology with a focus on social inequality.

She had looked at the name for a while.

Then she had clicked through to find the photograph. The photograph was, as expected, too formal, a wall of books behind him. He had grey hair, which didn't surprise her, and looked like someone who knew he looked too formal and had been photographed that way regardless. She closed the browser. Then she opened it again.

The professorship was there, and it carried a weight she didn't analyse. It didn't feel like an assessment of his standing, but like confirmation — the confirmation that she had read something correctly back then, in Göttingen. She had sensed that this man was someone. Now she knew she had been right. And that also meant she was someone who could tell — this was not quite a thought, more a posture that settled in her and that she didn't examine further.

What she didn't yet think that evening, but thought with increasing clarity over the weeks that followed: that Christoph Baumgärtner was the only person she had really talked to back then. Really, meaning: he had listened without wanting anything in return. That was the distinction she had worked out for herself during her studies, under circumstances she hadn't enjoyed: men who encouraged her to talk about Leopardi and Pavese did so most persistently when they had another aim in mind, and once the aim had been reached or abandoned, the interest in her thoughts stopped. Christoph had listened, and she had sensed that he took in what she said rather than simply waiting for her to finish — and that the listening carried no price she would have to pay later. That she had then wanted to pay a price herself, and had taken the initiative to do so, that same day, was another matter.

That was, if she was honest, so rare she could count the times.

She knew she was someone who noticed such things — the difference between real listening and the simulation of listening. Most people didn't. She did. That was what she was: someone

who recognised that quality. She had noticed it in him immediately, in Göttingen, and the fact that he was now a professor only confirmed what she had already sensed then.

She wrote the email on a Tuesday evening after Markus had gone down to the studio. She sat on the two-seater — the terracotta one, standing at an angle in the living room because it had never found a proper place and because that was now its place. She had seen it three years ago in a small furniture shop in the town centre, on a Saturday, on her way to something else, had sat down in it and known she would buy it, with money she had put aside over months for nothing particular. Markus had found the colour too loud. It was the only piece of furniture in the flat that belonged exclusively to her — not as the result of any agreement, but through the tacit understanding that arises when someone consistently doesn't use an object. Markus sat on the large sofa or at the kitchen table. He left her the two-seater without ever calling it that.

She sat there, the tablet on her knees, feet up, and wrote three versions in succession before sending one.

The first was too long. The second was too formal — she read the sentence *it would be a pleasure to renew our contact* and stopped: it sounded wrong, the cadence of the sentence was wrong, too stiff, too little like a woman writing to someone she wants to see again. She deleted the sentence. The third version was shorter and more right, and when she put the N beneath it, that was not coyness but a decision: who she was, he would be able to gather from the N, or he would not reply, and either would be an answer.

She sent the email and put down the tablet.

Then she picked it up again and read the email once more, because one does.

He replied the next morning, before she was at work. She saw it on her phone on the tram and read it several times: *Of course I remember.* His mobile number beneath.

The *of course* was right. It didn't sound polite. It sounded as though it went without saying, and that was a difference.

The first phone call lasted an hour and twenty minutes. She had been lying on the two-seater, knees drawn up, head against the high back, the phone loose in her hand, sometimes held to her ear, sometimes not, because the voice reached her either way — and she had talked, and he had listened and answered. She spoke quickly because she was sure of herself, because the conversation was holding — about Göttingen, about the retreats, about what had become of

them both, about Erlangen, about Bochum, about books. The books had been her subject, not his, she had brought them in and he had come along with it, and this had had a quality of naturalness, so effortless a naturalness that she only noticed afterwards that he had said almost nothing about his own work. The conversation had been hers. He had let her have it. He hadn't waited for her to ask. And all of this had felt right, that was the word: right. That was how it should be.

She had heard his accent immediately. That had surprised her for a moment — not the accent itself, but that it still belonged to him in exactly the same way as before, unchanged, the *fei*, the *-ng* that didn't clip the way the standard language did, but hung on a moment, as though the sound still had something in mind. In Göttingen she had thought: here is someone like me, someone whose origins were audible and who hadn't shed them. Now she heard that she had misjudged this. He didn't smooth anything because there was nothing to smooth. The accent was not an imperfection he carried with him — it was simply his voice, complete and unabbreviated.

And his sentences ended low, every one of them — she heard this more clearly now than she had in Göttingen, perhaps because she couldn't see him and the phone concentrated the sound. A finality she didn't know from other men. Most of the men she spoke with had voices that asked upwards or reached for room. His took room without asking. You could feel this physically — not as dominance, but as something settling, as though each sentence stood exactly where it should, without doubt and without appeal.

She thought: *he understands how I think.* That was not a sentence she explained to herself. It was simply there, as certainty, as though the conversation had confirmed it.

Afterwards she lay on the two-seater a while longer. Markus had been up to the flat at some point and gone back down again. She looked at the phone in her hand — half ten, he wouldn't be back before midnight at the earliest. She could still feel the afterglow of Christoph's voice in her, that settled, quiet quality that asked nothing. Then she looked at the screen, at the number showing the call length, and she looked at the number, and then she laughed, briefly, from the stomach, a laugh she hadn't planned and that had no purpose beyond this: that it felt right, and that it hadn't felt that way for a long time. And then she said, half to herself, without planning to: *That were good, ne.*

And her voice went up at the end, as it always did, and she didn't notice.

Markus asked at breakfast the next morning who she'd been on the phone to for so long.

Someone I know from one of the Scholars' Conferences, she said. A long time ago. We lost touch.

Markus nodded and drank his coffee. He had been editing the night before, the episode about the case in Castrop-Rauxel, and he looked a little tired, but the kind of tired that came from work rather than lack of sleep. He was a good cook, had been for years; tonight he would probably make something with lentils, because lentils were quick and because after editing days he had no appetite for anything complicated. She knew this.

He didn't press further. He was not a man who pushed, which she usually appreciated. She had married him for other reasons once — his work had impressed her, the idea of being with someone who wrote, who researched, who was connected to the world in a way that went beyond a travel agency. But what the work had promised it had not delivered, and at some point she had stopped reading it as a promise. The flat in Bochum-Ehrenfeld had been a temporary arrangement. They didn't say that any more.

She and Christoph had met in the spring of 2005 at a Scholars' Conference in Göttingen. Not at the selection weekend, but at one of the retreats that followed — that distinction had always mattered to her, though she couldn't have said exactly why. Perhaps because the selection weekend had been a test, something she had to pass, and the retreats something else: a space in which one already belonged, even if the feeling of belonging didn't quite sit yet.

She had given her talk on metre in Italian lyric poetry and afterwards stood with him at the samovar, and he had listened in the way that showed he was taking things in rather than simply waiting. She had heard his accent and thought: here too is someone whose origins can be heard, someone who hasn't got rid of them. That had meant something to her in that moment, even though she had been wrong about it.

That no message had come from him between the retreats had barely surprised her at the time — she hadn't written either, because his accent had raised, or so she had felt, a question she didn't want to have answered. Though he had been the one to approach her first, she had taken him for a shy type who didn't usually make the first move. That this had little to do with reality she didn't suspect.

What was there again now, nearly twenty years later, did not have the shape of nostalgia. It was something more matter-of-fact: the thought that the man she had been able to talk to back then was now a professor and answered when you wrote to him. That perhaps it didn't have to be over just because it had been absent for a while.

She thought: *he is the only person I have really talked to since I stopped being a student.*

She had read Ferrante then — all four volumes, shortly after finishing her degree — and had never forgotten the novels. What she loved about Ferrante was difficult to say, and she rarely tried: that extraordinary precision, the looking-in at a particular world, the constriction, the women who didn't escape, the shame that stayed even when you were long since somewhere else. She had packed up *L'amica geniale* and sent it to Christoph, shortly after the first phone call, all four volumes, with a note that said only *Dai.* Because he would understand. Because he was the only person she could give this to without having to explain why.

That was truly exceptional. She let the thought stand without examining whether it was true. It was true, for her, in that moment, and that was enough.

3

On the train to Düsseldorf he had the paper with him that he'd been meaning to revise for three weeks. He read the first page, read it again, put it in his bag. Outside, the Rhineland slid past, flat and grey.

Without looking for it, he found himself thinking of Göttingen — the samovar, the conversation, the way she had talked about Leopardi as though the poem were something one needed every day. He knew Leopardi differently: calmer, at a distance, with the familiarity of someone to whom the text had always belonged without having to be worked for. With her it had felt like necessity. That was something else, and he knew it was something else, even if he couldn't have said why it occupied him.

He looked out of the window. The Rhineland didn't end.

He sat in the bar and waited, and then she came through the door, and what he registered first was not her face — that came a second later — but the movement. She entered, and the way she entered changed the room immediately: not loudly, not with any calculation of effect, simply as though the room had been waiting for her until then. He stood before he had decided to stand. She saw him before he was on his feet, and didn't stop until he had come towards her and they had met in the middle.

She embraced him, ignoring the hand he had extended, briefly and without ceremony, as though this were simply the natural way of greeting each other, though they hadn't seen one another for almost twenty years. He smelled her perfume — the same as in Göttingen, he recognised, without being certain that was true — and then she was there, and his body had registered this before any thought followed.

Christoph, she said. Then: *Che meraviglia.*

You look well, he said.

You too, she said. *Fei no' bad for a professor.*

He laughed. She had caught his accent well — not perfectly, the vowel slightly off, but close enough that it wasn't mimicry but affection that had found its form. He wondered briefly whether she had practised, and let the question go. His voice, as he answered, fell — as it always fell — but more slowly than usual, with a small pause just before the end that he didn't notice himself.

They ordered wine, and the conversation began.

In conversations like these he had always had a particular quality of attention — the calm, steady attention of someone for whom listening comes naturally. Now it was different. Nadine talked, and her hands talked with her — not to illustrate her thoughts but as part of the thinking, as though the thought were not yet finished without the gesture that accompanied it. The people in his world moved when they spoke too, but with a built-in restraint, an awareness of one's own body that was never entirely forgotten. This had none of that. The fire that didn't know it was burning.

Her voice carried it. He didn't only hear what she was saying — he heard how the sentences ended. They rose, every one, lightly, with an openness forwards, as though each sentence were not quite finished, as though it were still looking for a response, a confirmation. This gave the conversation an energy his ordinary conversations didn't have — a vitality that compelled him to keep listening. He read it as vitality. He could have read it as something else. He read it as vitality.

They talked about Göttingen, about the retreats, about talks they both remembered differently. Nadine talked about Ferrante — she had sent him all four volumes after the first phone call, with a handwritten note containing only the word *Dai* — and about Calvino, and then about Pasolini, about *Accattone*, about the camera, the faces, the light. At Pasolini the energy of the sentences changed, they became denser, the pauses shorter.

That was real. That was the first thing he thought, and it was the right thing: the enthusiasm for Pasolini was not simply a gesture of her restless hands, it was genuine. He knew Claudia's relationship to the *verismo*, to the place where art and social reality meet, and he knew what real expertise sounded like. Real expertise became more complex when you pressed it, not flatter. It distinguished where others equated, and marked its own limits, because it knew the difference between secure and open ground. Nadine's enthusiasm for Pasolini was not expertise in the strict sense — there were moments where the argument reached too far, where a

formulation carried what the knowledge couldn't quite sustain. But the fire was genuinely there, and the fire had a quality he both knew and didn't know: he knew it as a phenomenon, but not from close up. In Claudia's world, in his world, fire was always tempered by distance — one loved a text, but one loved it with the ease of someone to whom it had always belonged. With Nadine it was different. The bodies in *Accattone*, poverty as physical fact, the milieu of those films — she talked about these without distance, as though the terrain the film described were also hers. He heard this. He didn't place it. He found the fire more genuine than academic correctness, and he took quiet, slightly comfortable pleasure in that judgement — he saw what others didn't see, and the seeing had its own quality.

She laughed once while talking about Pasolini — a brief, open laugh from the stomach, because she had liked a formulation she had just used. Later, at the end of a remark about Leopardi's relationship to Romanticism, came another: shorter, slightly higher, carrying a note that said *don't take that too seriously*, and he heard the difference without naming it.

At some point, after the third glass, she said: *That's what I mean when I say you think differently from other people. You really listen. That's rare.* She didn't say this to please him — he could hear that. She said it because saying it meant something to her. The saying itself was what mattered, the naming. He had heard this before, not from her, from other women, in a particular milieu, who framed their view of intellect and desire in a particular way — he didn't use the word that circulated for this structure, but he recognised the structure: the erotic charge of intellect as something one proved about oneself by recognising it in another. He didn't find it troubling yet. He found it interesting, another layer in the picture he was forming.

He tried once to say something about the paper he was currently working on — a question in field theory that had occupied him for weeks. She nodded, said *fascinating*, and then asked whether he knew Pasolini's late cultural criticism, the columns he had written for the *Corriere* shortly before his death. The conversation was back with her. He let it go, without finding it strange.

They went up to the room, and that was simple, there was no moment of uncertainty, because both of them knew why they were here.

What he remembered was not the words. It was the voice, which was the same even when it became quieter — the same texture, the same energy, only differently directed, more immediate, as though the voice were now for him alone. And the light coming through the gap in the curtains from the street, laying a narrow strip across the floor. And the line of the arch, brief and exact, before he had stopped looking.

That was what he thought about in the weeks that followed. And he thought about it more often than he had intended — on the train, while writing, just before sleep, as a physical memory that needed no intellectual placing and had none.

At breakfast they talked about Leopardi in a broader context, about the pessimism, about his place in the European history of ideas. Nadine spoke more carefully than the evening before, with a precision he registered: she was enunciating fully, her words landing properly, and that was where you could hear she was paying attention. He noted it without judging it, as a datum.

He himself mentioned *L'infinito* in passing, the final line, without thinking about it — the line had always been there, since childhood, since the books one opened because they were lying around, not because one was looking for them. That was no achievement. It was simply the ground.

Then she said that Leopardi, with his *pessimismo cosmico*, stood in direct lineage with Rousseau, who had settled accounts with civilisation in much the same fundamental way.

He opened his mouth.

Then he closed it.

That wasn't right, or at least it wasn't that simple. Rousseau's critique of civilisation had a normative direction, a vision of the good that it saw as having been lost — Leopardi's pessimism had none. The distance between the two was considerable, and the line Nadine drew between them skipped everything that lay in between.

He drank his coffee.

That's true, he said then, *but you'd have to look a good deal more carefully, fei — Rousseau still has a direction he's pointing in, aye.*

His voice fell as he said this — fell more quickly than the evening before, the sentence closed, clear and finished, as though it needed no response. It was not a correction, he noticed that only later, fleetingly, on the train — that the remark had not come from pure curiosity about her reaction, but from another impulse he couldn't yet name. In the moment of breakfast it was simply a sentence that had arisen because he was a sociologist and because such sentences arose. And he found the fire in her more genuine than the correct connection — he told himself that, and left it there.

Nadine nodded. *Right,* she said, *that might be too compressed.* And then she changed the subject, smoothly, with an *insomma* and a new approach, and the conversation went on.

He saw her change the subject. He saw that the change was a technique, not a decision. And he thought it shrewd — that she didn't even try what she couldn't sustain, and the way she moved on without trying.

He left soon after breakfast. The farewell was brief — an embrace, her cheek briefly against his jacket, her hand on his arm. She stood on the pavement in front of the hotel. He didn't turn back.

On the train he sat at the window, the paper on his lap. He opened it and read the first paragraph, and this time he read further.

But ten minutes later he was thinking again about breakfast, about the Rousseau moment, about the mouth he had opened and closed. That was a datum, he knew that, even if he hadn't yet placed it: he had not said something, and the not-saying had felt like a decision, even if he hadn't consciously made one.

And then, without looking for it, something interrupted the thought — not the thought about Rousseau, but the other thing, physical, the strip of light on the floor, the voice that had the same texture even when quieter. He sat with the paper on his lap and didn't think about the paper, for a while, before he noticed.

He made a marginal note in the paper. Outside the Rhineland passed, then Hesse, then the first hills he recognised. He wrote on.

4

The video calls had acquired a structure without either of them arranging one. Tuesday and Thursday evenings, usually from nine, sometimes earlier when Markus was in the studio. Wednesday sometimes too. Once on a Sunday afternoon, which had felt different — too open, too little separated from what the rest of the day was — and both of them had felt this without saying so, and after that Sunday afternoon was no longer a day for calls.

When Markus was in the living room she took the call from the bedroom; otherwise she preferred the two-seater. She had not developed a guilty conscience about this — it was more a careful division of space, the way one keeps things that don't belong together in separate drawers, which isn't a lie but simply order.

In April they had talked about Pavese.

A few weeks earlier she had reread *La luna e i falò* — reread wasn't quite right, she had started it during her degree and never finished it, so *reread* was only accurate in the sense that the beginning had been there before. She left that as it was in her mind.

She sat on her two-seater, the tablet propped against the left arm, feet up on the seat — the position she had for these conversations, the one that felt right. Her sentences were shorter than usual, and between them were pauses she didn't fill. The melody was different too: sentences ending flatter, less high, as though her voice deepened with the thinking.

It's about someone who comes back, she said. *Who comes home, after decades. And realises that what he calls home never really existed. That he'd built a picture of it and now he's standing in the rubble of that picture, like. And Pavese writes this without saying so. He just lets the man look.*

And go back? asked Christoph.

No, she said. *There's nowhere to go back to. That's the thing* — She stopped. Started again. *It's homesickness for a place you were never really at. That's what's strangest about it. You miss something that wasn't there.*

Christoph was quiet for a moment — the silence she knew by now: not empty, but full of something that needed no name as long as it wasn't named. She didn't know what was happening in it. She only knew that he was listening, really listening, and that the silence was not an absence but a form of answer.

That's good, he said.

I don't know if it's right.

It doesn't have to be right, he said. *It just has to be true.*

She paused a moment before answering. The sentence had touched something that sat deeper than its content — not in the mind but somewhere beneath, physical. She said nothing about this. She kept thinking, and the thinking had the quality she liked about these conversations: that a sentence set something in motion that then kept moving inside her for a while, without her immediately knowing where.

Then Christoph said: *There's a passage in his diary* — and he began to explain something, a note Pavese had written shortly before his death, something about the relationship between writing and silence. He spoke quietly, with the care of someone developing a thought he trusts.

Nadine listened, nodded, and then said: *That puts me in mind of a passage in Calvino, you know, this* — and the conversation was back with her, with what she had brought to it, with her books. He let it happen without naming it.

They talked about Calvino more quickly. The way in was *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, and Nadine spoke, and the sentences tumbled over each other because she was sure of herself — but this sureness had a different texture from the Pavese, noticeably different: more momentum, less weight, as though the knowledge here were not coming from inside but sitting well-learned. She genuinely loved Calvino, that was not in question, but the loving had a different quality: Pavese was recognition, Calvino was enthusiasm. The sentences ended high, the rising melody came back fully, her hands moved in front of the camera, and the image shifted briefly because a gesture had gone too far.

That's the most wonderful thing, isn't it, she said, *that feeling of being addressed. That a book says: you. Exactly you. Not everyone — you.* A single sound came and went at once, not quite the careful standard language she'd been speaking, and she noticed it and let it stand, because it didn't matter now, not in this conversation, not with him.

It's fei also a form of appropriation, said Christoph.

Of course it is, she said. *But it's one you want. That's the difference.*

He laughed, the rare, dry laugh, and she felt how the conversation was holding.

Then he asked: *Have you read the preface? The passage where he describes how the book is built?*

Of course, yes, she said — and the *of course* came half a second too early, she heard it herself. And then, because it had been marginally too loud: *I'd have to read it again, it was a while ago.*

Worth doing, he said.

Yes, she said. *I will.*

The conversation moved on, and the moment had closed, and she had closed it, and he had watched without either of them calling it that.

During these weeks she had started telling him what she thought of him — not in a single conversation but incidentally, scattered through, always at the end of her thinking about a book or a director: *that's what I mean when I say you're an interesting case*, or: *you think in a way that makes me feel I have to think too, that's rare.* And once, on a Thursday evening, after a particularly long conversation about Bernhard: *I genuinely don't know anyone I can talk to like this.*

That was sincere. That was as sincere as she could be about anything. But the sentence carried more than it said: that he was exceptional; that she recognised exceptionality, and that this was itself a quality not everyone had; that conversation with him was the conversation she was owed, that she deserved. All of it was sincerely meant, and all of it pointed in the same direction, back to her.

Christoph answered these sentences mostly briefly. Sometimes he said nothing. Sometimes: *I'd say the same.* The brevity of his answers she read as confirmation — a man who doesn't exaggerate, who says what he means and no more.

At the end of August Markus asked whether she wanted a holiday. His sister had a house in Lorraine, two weeks in September, did she fancy it.

She said she'd have to check how things stood with work.

She checked three days later. There were no clashes. She booked the journey and called Christoph on a Thursday and said she was going away in September, to Lorraine, with Markus, she'd be in touch before they left.

Lorraine, he said. *Good choice. Fine in September.*

Do you know it?

I was there once, he said. *Many years ago. I was passing through on my way somewhere, I can't quite remember why.*

Somewhere is sometimes the best place, she said, and that was one of those sentences that sounded larger than its occasion, and she knew it, and it was still the right sentence, because it held the feeling, and with him she didn't allow herself a retreat.

He said nothing, and the silence had its own quality.

Right then, she said finally — and her voice went up, as it always did, not a statement, a question dressed as a close. A pause. *Good.* A pause. *I'll be in touch before we go.*

Do that, he said.

She didn't press the end button straight away. Held the tablet still on her lap, the screen still bright, then looked at the dark screen that remained. Then she set it down beside her. She sat a while longer, hands in her lap, without moving — not because she was thinking, but because the conversation was still in her and standing up would end it.

Through the living room window the street was visible, the Eschenweg, quiet, and what the streetlamps lit was nothing particular. Markus was still in the studio — she knew this because his jacket was missing and because it was just after half past nine and he rarely came earlier. The flat was quiet in the way that carries no tension.

She thought, before she turned out the light: *e 'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.* That was Leopardi, that was the line that had remained from Göttingen when the rest of the poem had let her down — the only one that always came. Now she knew the way to it too, since the affair had begun, as though the poem had returned because it was needed again.

She turned out the light. That was not a large thought. It was simply the line, and then the dark, and then sleep.

5

The seminar on social inequality and cultural reproduction had been running for three semesters, always on Mondays, always at ten, always in a room on the top floor whose heating did too much in winter and too little in summer. Christoph liked the seminar. It was what he had become a sociologist for, or at least that was what he told himself.

This Monday in September he had Bourdieu on the programme. Habitus, cultural capital, fields. The foundational concepts he had been teaching for fifteen years and that still didn't seem worn to him, because they were precise in a way that didn't fade.

He wrote *Habitus* on the board and below it a question he phrased differently each semester but that always came to the same thing: *Who is permitted to be what they are?*

Kerem had given a good presentation, solid, with one moment that surprised Christoph: *The education system doesn't reward knowledge. It rewards the form in which knowledge is presented. It rewards those who have learned to make knowledge sound as though they grew up with it.*

And what follows from that? Christoph had asked.

That it's a lie, Kerem had said. *The whole meritocracy promise.*

Or, Christoph had said, *that it isn't a promise being broken, but a mechanism doing what mechanisms do. Lies have intentions. Mechanisms don't.*

After the seminar he ate alone in the cafeteria, at a table by the window. He thought about Kerem's formulation. *Making knowledge sound as though you grew up with it.* That was precise. That was a good formulation — for the seminar, for the students, for what they were thinking

about. He ate his pasta. The formulation was useful for the group, that went without saying, and he didn't think further in that direction.

Nadine got in touch that evening at nine, punctually.

He was sitting in his home study, the door ajar, a paper on the desk that he'd been meaning to revise for a week. He pushed it aside. The house was quiet, even behind the closed door of Claudia's study — the quiet of someone wearing headphones with the world blocked out. He took the earbuds from the desk, put them in, answered the call.

Hi, said Nadine. *I've been thinking about Sebald the whole journey today. I'm reading The Rings of Saturn and —*

She was already in the middle of it before he could have said anything, and he noticed this, as he had noticed it more often over the past weeks: that the conversation began as though she'd had it ready in her head, finished and prepared, and that the space between her greeting and her first substantive sentence was too narrow for any subject he might have raised. He leaned back and listened.

The voice came through the earbuds directly, without the slight softness of the loudspeaker, and that changed something. The sentences ended high — he heard this more clearly than usual, straight to the ear, without the room between that would have softened the sound. The rising melody arrived before the content did. He noticed this, and noticed that he was hearing not the sentences first but the melody, and that the melody held him regardless of what it meant.

She spoke well about Sebald — the folding together of layers, the figure of the walker who sees everything at once, history and landscape and one's own remembering. That was genuine reading, he could tell. He listened with two points of attention simultaneously: one following what she said, and one watching how she said it — where the sentences were confident and where they veered towards the surface before they could be asked for depth. *That's well done,* he thought. Not as a judgement. As an observation of a process that interested him.

He wasn't taking notes, as he did in work conversations. He noticed this, and pushed the thought aside.

Then she said: *You know, I've been thinking about our last conversation today too, and I just have to say — I genuinely don't know anyone who thinks the way you do. This isn't just a compliment. I mean it.* A short pause, and then, with a tone that went upward, that was looking for an answer: *Do you feel it too? That what we have is really exceptional?*

He heard this, and the first response was a placing of it, not a defence: the same structure as in Düsseldorf, over the third glass, when she had said that he thought differently from other people. The erotic charge of intellect as proof of intellect. He knew the pattern now, and registered it steadily, as information — no longer as an interesting layer but as something he recognised.

And then the voice came through the earbuds, warm and direct, and the placing became smaller without disappearing. He watched himself go on listening, for a moment, and noticed he was listening more than the placing required. The listening was not analytical. He pushed the thought aside, as he had pushed it aside several times before.

I'd say the same, he said. *These conversations are fei rare.*

Almost to his surprise she didn't pick up his words at all but moved straight to the next subject.

He kept the observation that had no name. She had never asked about the texts he was working on. In his world knowledge was not a badge one displayed — it was a tool one used, and one asked about it because one wanted to know, not because one wanted to be seen knowing. Display was foreign to him as a social practice; not asking about the other person was even more foreign. He registered this, not yet as a problem, but as a fact that remained. What she wanted from him was not clear to him.

At some point she came to Moravia — she had started *Gli indifferenti*, had texted him about this reading the week before, and now she talked about it, about the figure of Michele, about indifference as a condition rather than an attitude.

What's interesting about Moravia, though, she said, *is that he describes this using the methods of the verismo, like — that focus on class, that precision, he's actually closer to Verga than to Pirandello.*

He heard this.

In what way Verga? he asked. The question came without plan, without preparation — the cue was there, and the reflex to test things was rooted in him more deeply than any conscious decision. His voice fell as he asked — quickly, closing, without the rise her sentences had.

A small pause. *Well, that naturalism, like. That observational angle, looking into a class from outside.*

And how does Pirandello fit into that?

A slightly longer pause this time. Then: *Pirandello's obviously — Pirandello's more complex. Pirandello is more* — she broke off briefly, just a half breath — *more philosophical, like, less sociological.*

That was a turn around a point that would have required substance. She had bent the sentence before it could show its weight.

He saw this. He saw that she didn't.

That was the result, to the extent he had one: a gap she was covering. Whether she had forgotten or whether it had never been there, he couldn't say.

And then, briefly and quietly, he felt something he recognised as pleasure: not in the gap itself, but in what he could do with it, in the picture that was forming — he understood what was happening here, in its full structure, the social difference, the fire that was not expertise, the history of this connection that only he could read in its entirety. He was author, reader, and participant at once. That had its own quality.

Her sentences lifted slightly at the end when she said something important — even when they weren't questions. The rising melody, directly through the earbuds: the seeking of confirmation he knew by now, the small rise that said *I'm still here, are you still there?* He registered this steadily, as a feature of a mode of communication.

And then, towards the end of the call, she said something about the relationship between landscape and memory in Sebald that was genuinely precise, that she had formulated from within herself, without support. He stayed with it a moment. That was the most genuine thing. When the support fell away and something still stood.

But here too she had not asked what he thought. Not about his reading, not about his book. She had given him something — that one precise sentence — and then moved on, as though the giving were the only thing that counted.

The voice carried that too, even that. Warm, direct, addressed to him, and yet always in one direction. He listened longer than necessary, because the melody held him, even if he didn't call it that.

After the call he sat at his desk a while longer.

The bookshelf was in his sightline. Third shelf from the top, between two other spines: Bourdieu, *Distinction*. He knew the passages, he knew the pages, muscle memory would have taken him there without thinking.

He looked at the book.

Then he picked up the paper from the desk. A paragraph that was resisting, that knew it was weak. He read it, saw how it needed to be rewritten, and wrote.

The Bourdieu stayed where it was. He didn't need the book. What he had seen he had seen without it, and the book would have given him nothing he didn't already have.

That was what he told himself, at any rate. It was a thought that dissolved before it could settle.

6

After the conversation about Moravia — which had been good, she had felt that, Christoph had listened and asked a question and she had answered, and the conversation had held — she had for a few days the feeling that something was right that was rarely right.

She didn't try to analyse the feeling. She let it be there, on the way to work, typing up replies to enquiries, at dinner with Markus, who was working on a new episode about an unsolved case from the nineties. Sometimes he brought his laptop to the kitchen table and played a clip, headphones round his neck, and listened with his head slightly tilted. She watched him, said yes or no to his questions, which were not really questions but thinking aloud.

He still hadn't replied to the journalism school's offer. The letter lay on the desk in the living room, in a pile of other post, and sometimes she saw it lying there and thought that Markus could look at it if he wanted to, and that he evidently didn't want to yet.

She called Christoph on a Thursday, just after half past nine.

After the third ring she saw his face on the screen: still at his desk, the concentration of the evening still in his posture. She knew this by now, this particular expression when he had just been pulled out of something.

Am I interrupting?

No, he said. *I was just finishing.*

She sat on her two-seater, the tablet propped against the left arm, feet on the seat, hands free. They talked about a book she was reading — Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon* — and the

conversation was different from recent weeks: quieter at the start, more tentative, as though the direction were still finding itself.

Then she said, without having planned to: *You know what fascinates me about you, like? You actually think. That sounds banal, but I don't mean it as banal. Most people listen in order to answer. You listen in order to understand. I find that — I find that incredibly rare.*

She spoke quickly because she was sure of herself, her hands moving in front of the camera — she was explaining something, and the explaining needed the hands, and the sentences ended high, every one, looking for a reaction. *I think I'm someone who notices that,* she said. *Most people don't even have the — the capacity to recognise it. I do. And with you you can tell straight away.*

The capacity she meant was, for her, proof of something: she had studied Romance languages, she had read Leopardi, she loved Pavese and Pasolini, and because she loved and recognised these things, she belonged — to the world in which one recognised such things. The sapiosexual desire was the key that opened this door, and she didn't see the door, only the open space beyond it.

That's a good quality to have, said Christoph.

Brief. No contradiction, no confirmation, only the six words, and then silence. She took this as agreement — a man who doesn't exaggerate, who says what he means and no more. The brevity of his answer always had this quality: that it felt like the final word, even when it wasn't.

Then she sat back a moment, hands in her lap, and felt that what she had just said was more than an observation. Not only the thought about him — the other thing, beneath it, that had no language.

They talked on, about Ginzburg, and the conversation slowed because the book required it. The melody of her voice changed: fewer rises, more silence between the sentences. Genuine thinking had a different intonation from the confident kind.

It's like — she was searching, her hands now still — *it's like when someone shows you a box and you look inside and there's only odds and ends. Old buttons and bits of string and a key that nobody knows what it's for any more. And at first you think: dat's nothing. And then you look longer, and you realise that that's everything. That the whole of a life is in those odds and ends, the way it actually was, not the way you tell it to yourself.*

She stopped, because nothing more came.

Christoph was quiet.

Then he said: *That's the hardest thing in writing — letting the small things carry their own weight, without adding it from outside.*

Yes, she said. *Exactly that.*

That was a real moment, she could feel it, one of those in which the conversation arrived. She had said something true, something that had come from her, and he had taken it up and carried it further.

Then he said, incidentally, the way someone says something that has just occurred to them: *We always had a copy of that book at home — I think I started it ten times, never finished it, because it was always just there. Ginzburg has that quality, things you don't possess but that simply exist.*

She heard this, and something in her shifted before she knew what it was. *We always had a copy at home* — not: *I bought it*, not: *I read it*, but: *it was simply there.* That was something she didn't know. Markus had had no such books. No one in her world had had that — the taken-for-granted, the simply-present, that required no decision, no effort.

What books were just there at yours? she asked. She rarely pressed further. Now she did, and the question came from a different place than her usual sentences.

He answered briefly: two or three titles, a detail about the family home in Fürth, his mother who read, his father who was an architect and had other interests. He said it without weight, because it carried no weight for him — it was simply the ground, not the point. Then the subject was done with, for him.

She would have heard more. The brevity of his answer left her with a slight hunger she didn't name — the first time the conversation had moved in a direction that gave her something she wasn't prepared for, and he had closed it.

It's fei a very political decision, Ginzburg's syntax, he said then, and the conversation found its footing again.

Yes, said Nadine, *and that puts me in mind of a passage in the letters she wrote to Pavese, you know, there's this* — and the conversation was back with her, with what she had brought to it. He let it happen.

Towards the end of the evening she came back to what she had said at the start, but from a different angle.

You're actually a case apart, d'you know that? A short pause. And then, with a tone that was asking for something: *I mean that. You're someone who watches himself while he's thinking. Right now, while we're talking, you're watching yourself. I can see it.*

He was quiet a moment — the pause that filled nothing, that simply stood. She let it stand.

Or they notice and don't find it interesting, he said.

That was neither agreement nor denial. It was a shift, precise and effortless, that moved the conversation half a step forward without telling her whether she was right. That was what she liked about him and what she sometimes couldn't grasp: he always answered, and the answer was always genuine, and yet it was never quite what she had been looking for.

No, she said, with a certainty that surprised her. *I don't think so. I think most people don't even have the capacity for it.*

He didn't answer straight away. She waited.

What she didn't hear in this silence: that the formulation sounded different to him than to her. That *you're a case apart* and *I can see it, most people can't* together produced something that didn't dissolve the testing situation but confirmed it. That in these sentences he heard not only affection but the need for an answer she required and that he didn't want to give her, because he didn't understand what she needed it for.

She didn't hear this. She heard the silence and thought he was thinking, and that was also true.

Right then, she said finally, as the conversation rounded off — and her voice went up, as it always did. *Good.* A shorter pause than in earlier conversations. *I'll be in touch.*

Do that, he said.

She ended the call. More quickly than usual, without noticing. It had been good. The Ginzburg moment had been right. And the thing about the family home — that stayed, like a picture that had shifted by a fraction, so that something was now visible in it that hadn't been visible before.

She put the tablet on the coffee table and picked up the book that was lying there and read a few more pages. The light in the hall came on — Markus was back earlier than usual, she heard him close the front door, take off his shoes, go to the kitchen.

He came into the living room, still in his jacket.

Done? she asked.

Nearly, he said. *One of the transitions isn't sitting right.* He dropped into the armchair and looked briefly at the ceiling. That was his way when he hadn't quite switched off yet.

She nodded and read on. He'd sort it tomorrow. That was always how it was.

7

Nadine had chosen the hotel in Cologne, as in Düsseldorf — smaller this time, near the Rhine. He had arrived Wednesday lunchtime, had got through the meeting with the publisher in the early afternoon — straightforward, no surprises, the book on track — and then walked to the hotel. He stood a moment in front of the entrance. The building was late nineteenth century, sandstone facade, the window lines regular and without effort — someone had done this well, without drawing attention to themselves. He registered this, with the eye he had inherited from his father and put to different use. And then he registered that he had stopped, and that it had nothing to do with the building.

Nadine was already waiting in the lobby when he came in. That was different from Düsseldorf — there he had waited, she had arrived. Now it was the other way round, and the second meeting began in this way a little differently: more familiar, calmer, without the tension of the first reunion after twenty years. She stood as he came towards her, embraced him briefly, and the greeting had a naturalness the first time hadn't had.

Christoph. Then, as in Düsseldorf: *Che meraviglia.*

He smelled the same perfume. And something in him that he hadn't directed responded to it before he knew it had.

At dinner she talked about Pasolini. *Teorema* this time — she had watched the film again the week before the meeting, and she talked about it with an enthusiasm that was genuine, he heard that immediately. The energy of the sentences changed when she was sure of herself, they became denser, the pauses shorter.

What I can't get past, she said, *is that scene with Emilia eating the nettles. Straight from the ground.* A sound came and went, not quite the careful standard language she'd been holding to. *But in this whole film full of desire and destruction that's the only moment that's physically true. No staging. Just hunger. The body wanting the simplest thing.*

Because hunger needs no interpretation, he said.

Exactly. She leaned forward, her hand briefly on the table. *Exactly that.*

He extended a finger briefly — *there* — and she nodded. This was observation, not participation, he registered without calling it that: he sat across from her and watched the conversation move inside her, saw the fire and saw the structure of the fire. Both interested him simultaneously, and the simultaneity had its own quality that he kept to himself: he was seeing something that of the two of them only he could see in full.

And also simultaneously, beneath it, undiminished: the voice, the hands, the way she leaned forward when something mattered to her. That couldn't be thought away. He didn't think it away.

She talked on, about Pasolini's political thinking, about his late columns for the *Corriere*, and then moved to Visconti — *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, the camera on the brothers' bodies, the dignity of the south that one cannot escape. She talked about this with an energy that made him pay closer attention: this was not an analytical view, this was not a reading from outside. She knew the milieu of these films in a way that didn't come from studying — more physical, more concrete, as though the terrain the films described were also hers, even if she would never put it that way. He knew these films as objects of research; Claudia had taken him through neo-realism. Nadine's relationship to Italian cinema was something else. He found that — still — beautiful. He drew no conclusions.

He knew Claudia's relationship to the *verismo*, to the place where art and social reality meet, and he knew what real expertise sounded like. Real expertise became more complex when you pressed it, not flatter. It distinguished where others equated, and marked its own limits, because it knew the difference between secure and open ground. Nadine's enthusiasm for Pasolini was not expertise in the strict sense — there were moments where the argument reached too far, where a formulation carried what the knowledge couldn't quite sustain. But the fire was genuinely there, and the fire had a quality he both knew and didn't know: in his world fire was always tempered by distance. This simply burned, without knowing it was burning.

Then she said: *It's actually very Marxist in its basic position, that idea that consumption destroys the soul of a class more than any physical oppression. It's almost Engels, with him.*

He paused.

Engels how? he asked. Calm, no edge. His voice fell as he asked — quickly, closing.

Her sentences slowed, slightly. *Well, that — that focus on the base, on the material as what's fundamental. That determinism.*

But Engels has a different concept of determinism from Pasolini, he said. *In Engels the base has a direction, a history. Pasolini's critique of capitalism is more — he's mourning something that's gone. That's nostalgic, not dialectical.*

She nodded, and the nodding was not the nodding of understanding — it was the nodding of moving on. *Right,* she said, *right, I've maybe oversimplified that — Pasolini is actually genuinely sui generis, you can't put him in a box.*

He heard the intonation: for a moment the melody fell flat, the seeking of confirmation was gone — the gap, audible as a pause, before the pattern came back. He noticed this.

And he kept the other thing too: that the nodding had not taken in the correction but sidestepped it, with an elegance he admired. She presented knowledge as erotic capital, and when the capital proved insufficient she found another way — smooth, without rupture. That was not deception, it was seduction, and seduction had its own aesthetic. In his world no one needed this — substance spoke for itself, performance was superfluous. He saw it as a particular quality, not a necessity. He didn't name it. He saw it as the fire that didn't know it was burning, the *sprezzatura* of the sidestep.

And then he heard her voice beginning the next sentence, and the watching stepped back, one step, as it always stepped back.

They went up to the room, and Cologne was different from Düsseldorf — without the weight of the first time, without the built-in formality of arrival. What remained when that fell away was this: no restraint, no built-in distance from oneself, only this vehemence that held nothing back and observed nothing. He knew intensity, but always with a residual awareness of one's own effect. This had none of that. Both were present in him at once: the desire and the observation of the desire, and he experienced this as a privilege, not a contradiction.

Afterwards they lay beside each other, and the light coming through the curtains was the orange-yellow scatter of a city night. Nadine talked for a while, about nothing in particular, about the hotel, about a trip to Sicily she had once planned.

He listened, even now, even when the content dissolved. Her voice had a different quality in this room than through the earbuds — warmer, less sharply defined. The falling movement of his own voice, when he answered, was slower than in the evening — heavier, more grounded. The *fei*, when he used it, had the small pause before the sound resolved itself.

He lay awake after she had fallen asleep. Not restless — awake in the way that has no task. He heard her breathing. The city light through the curtains. He didn't think about tomorrow, about the train, about the paper sitting on his desk in Erlangen. He thought about nothing that had a language.

Thursday morning he had gone down briefly — two cups of coffee from the buffet, tea for her, a few rolls, whatever was there — and carried it up on a tray. They had breakfast in bed, the tray between them, and talked about Ginzburg.

He had read *Family Lexicon* years ago, and he said what had stayed with him: the economy of it, the leaving out. That what remains has to carry its own weight.

That's the hardest thing, he said. *Letting the small things carry their weight, without helping them along.*

I told you that, she said.

Aye, you did, he said. *And you were right.*

And then he was quiet, because it occurred to him what had not been said: she had opened the conversation about Ginzburg, about Pavese, about Pasolini, about Sebald — in two meetings and countless video calls she had never asked what he was working on. The book manuscript that had been on his desk for two years, that he discussed with his doctoral students, that he argued about with colleagues — she didn't know it, because she had never asked.

He registered this without feeling: she wanted him to see and confirm her intellectual world. That was her need for reflection, the structure he was beginning to map.

He didn't think about the fact that his readiness to let her have the conversation had helped shape this need. That question he didn't ask himself.

He drank his coffee. And then, briefly, his father: the thought came of its own accord. His father had always known how to sound — had won commissions through the conviction in his voice, through the gesture, through the assured manner of speaking about things whose substance was sometimes thinner than the language covering it. Christoph set the thought aside. He drew no connection.

He had had a train booked for that afternoon. He didn't look at the time.

Nadine lay beside him, her cup in both hands, looking out of the window. The light fell on the side of her face. He looked at that, and then at the Rhine, grey and even outside, and then back at her, in the way one looks at something one hasn't quite finished looking at. The analysis from the evening before was still present — the gap, the *sprezzatura*, the structure — but it was smaller than this, smaller than the light on her face and the empty cup in her hands and the fact that she was lying there wanting nothing from him, in this moment, simply lying there.

The silence was already a decision, and both of them knew it without saying so.

Then: *I could take a later one.*

That was not a break with the original plan. It was the allowing of something that had already decided itself — not now, not in this sentence, but in the night when he had lain awake not knowing why, and not needing to know. She looked at him for a moment, and he held the look, and then she said: *Yes.*

That was all. He had told Claudia he was in Cologne until Thursday for a meeting with a publisher. That was true for Wednesday. The rest was a gap. He thought this, for half a sentence, and put the thought away.

He sent Claudia a brief message: the publisher meeting was running on, he'd be back later. She replied with a thumbs up, which was her way.

In the afternoon they walked along the Rhine. The sky was low, the air cool, the path along the bank busy with walkers he didn't notice. They talked, and then were quiet, and the quiet had no tension. The analysis he always carried was quieter than usual — not gone, but stepped back behind the walking itself, which had no function.

On the way back, just before they reached the hotel, she coughed. Once, dry. Then again.

All right? he asked.

Yes, she said. *Just cold.*

He glanced at her, and then they walked on. He didn't take her answer as final.

8

She had suggested Cologne as the meeting place because the city had no history for her — she knew it from work trips, from stopovers, a place you know without knowing it. That was right for what was needed.

She had said something vague to Markus — training, Cologne, two days. He hadn't asked further.

At dinner she had talked about Pasolini, about *Teorema*, about the scene with Emilia eating the nettles, straight from the ground, without explanation, without gesture. *Dat sounds daft maybe* — the *dat* came quickly and was gone — *but in this whole film full of desire and destruction that's the only moment that's physically true. No staging. Just hunger. The body wanting the simplest thing.*

Christoph had listened in the way she knew — still, precise, a brief nod when something was right. The conversation had held, from the start, and she had felt how the energy settled, the only energy this kind of conversation had: the conversation with someone who genuinely thinks.

That Christoph knew Pasolini differently from her she had sensed, but hadn't named it. He knew him from the outside, as an object of analysis — he had placed Marx and Engels alongside, had refined concepts of determinism, had situated the film in a theoretical landscape that was a term she knew but didn't inhabit. She knew Pasolini differently: not as a subject but as recognition. The milieu of these films was not foreign to her as an object of study. She couldn't have said that, and she didn't say it. She thought instead: *he's a scholar, I'm a reader.* That was the interpretation that satisfied her.

She had said something about Pasolini and Engels — a connection that interested her, that she couldn't fully work out, but that felt right. Christoph had paused, briefly, and then asked: *Engels how?* She had answered as well as she could, and he had refined it — something about concepts of determinism, about the difference between dialectics and nostalgia — and she had nodded and carried the conversation on, on firmer ground.

Christoph's pause before his question she had not heard as a correction. She had sensed his thinking, had read his pause as the sign of a man who doesn't answer immediately because he's weighing things up. That was the quality she valued.

Afterwards they lay together in the room. The orange-yellow light falling through the curtains. She talked for a while, about nothing in particular, and he listened, and his voice, when he answered, had a quality she registered more strongly in the dark than usual: the falling movement of his sentences, each one closed in itself, with a weight that pulled downward rather than reaching upward. That was the opposite of her own voice, and the contrast drew her in — the calm of something finished, that asked nothing further. Here, in this room, that was closer and more physical than through the tablet's loudspeaker.

The way he was that night had no restraint — that surprised her, because she had expected restraint from him, the built-in distance she knew from other men who were aware of being watched. It wasn't there. That had told her something clearer than anything he had ever put into words.

She fell asleep before him. She knew this because he was still awake when she closed her eyes, and she felt it without seeing it — the wakefulness beside her, calm, without restlessness, simply there.

Thursday morning they had had breakfast in bed, the tray between them, and he had said *Semmeln* automatically as he reached for a roll, and she had heard it and laughed — the real laugh, brief and unprepared, because it had been so offhand, so without intention.

Then he had mentioned the book she had recommended to him — Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon* — and said that Ginzburg's greatest achievement was the leaving out. *That's the hardest thing, letting the small things carry their weight without helping them along.* And she had looked at him and said: *I told you that.* And he had said: *Aye, you did. And you were right.*

That was the moment she held onto. He had listened, had taken in what she said, and given it back. Such moments were rare.

But what she held onto even more was the other thing — what had been there in the night, and what was still in the room, even now, while he drank his coffee and looked at her. She didn't want to lose that.

Briefly, for the fraction of a second, there was something else — not a thought, more a slight pulling that vanished at once because the moment was too good: *what if he one day notices* — and then it was gone, because he was looking at her and there was no occasion for it.

I'm someone a man like him can talk to, she thought — not a formulated sentence, more a feeling that settled, warm and quiet. The thought meant: he can talk to her, so she is someone he can talk to, so she is someone of his standing, his level, his world. The connection was complete and invisible, and she didn't see it, because it felt self-evident.

Then he said: *I could take a later one.*

She heard this and let it stand a moment without answering. Outside the river, grey and even, a Thursday that had no shape yet.

Yes, she said.

That was all that needed saying.

In the afternoon they walked along the Rhine. The sky was low, the air cool. They talked, and then were quiet, and the quiet had no tension. She didn't know walks like this — walks with no destination and no function, walking simply because walking was the right thing. In Bochum you walked somewhere. Here they just walked.

On the way back, just before they reached the hotel, she felt a scratch in her throat. She swallowed, once, twice. It stayed.

All right? he asked.

Yes, she said. *Just cold.*

He glanced at her — the kind of look that didn't insist — and they walked on. She noticed that he hadn't taken her answer as final. He had looked at her and kept her in view, without making anything of it, in a way that didn't interrupt but was present. She registered this and let it stand, because it was the right thing.

9

They spent Friday morning in bed, as the morning before — coffee from the buffet, the tray between them, the silence that wasn't a problem. Nadine's voice still had the slightly rougher tone from the day before, but the cough that had briefly appeared in the evening didn't show itself. They talked about Ginzburg, about Pavese, about a film they both knew that belonged to each of them differently, and he listened as he always listened. That was their form, and it held, still.

In the early afternoon they went to the Wallraf-Richartz. It had been Nadine's suggestion — she had mentioned the museum briefly once, in a different context, weeks ago, and he had retained it without knowing why. Inside it was cool and quiet, the rooms with the Flemish and German masters almost empty on a Friday afternoon. He heard the changed quality of her voice in the hall space — less sharp than usual, more muted, but the energy was the same.

In front of one of the large paintings the cough came. Not the dry, brief cough of the evening before — deeper, more sustained, in a way that had no intention and couldn't be ignored. She raised her hand, leaned briefly against the wall. He stood beside her and waited, without asking.

Let's go, he said.

She wanted to object — he saw that before she started. Then she let it go.

He brought her back to the hotel, took her as far as the lift, but didn't go up with her, and instead went back to the reception desk. He asked where the nearest pharmacy was. It was five minutes away.

When he came into the room, Nadine was sitting on the armchair, feet drawn up onto the seat, knees held with both arms, jacket still on. He set the bag on the bedside table — cough syrup, throat lozenges, paracetamol in case, a thermometer — and turned to her. She looked as

though she was about to explain that she was fine, that this wasn't necessary, that she was actually — he didn't let her start. He took off his jacket and shoes and lay down on the bed, the duvet pulled to one side, and looked at her.

She looked across at him.

You're lying down, she said.

I'm lying down, he said.

Then she took off her jacket.

She lay down beside him, and he pulled the duvet over both of them, and the room was quiet, the muted light of the late afternoon through the curtains. Her breathing was slightly rougher than usual, irregular, and he heard this, and heard also how it slowed as she leaned against him. He had his hand on her back, steady, without stated intention.

At some point she coughed, briefly, against his shoulder. He waited.

I'm not ill, she said.

I didn't say that.

You're thinking it.

What I'm thinking, he said, *is that you should be quiet now.*

She was quiet, but not because he had said so — he heard that. His thumb had begun moving in small circles over her back, slowly, without hurry, in a way that was imperceptibly departing from care. Her hand lay on his chest. The breathing slowed further, but differently from before — not deeper, but more concentrated, turned inward.

He knew she wasn't sleeping. She knew he knew.

The thumb didn't stop.

After a while she raised herself slightly, looked at him — her eyes still carrying the energy the cough hadn't entirely dampened — and he held the look, and then he kissed her, because that was the continuation, not the beginning.

The cough came, once, in between. Neither of them let it count.

Afterwards they lay beside each other. She coughed twice, dryly, and he passed her water from the bedside table without sitting up.

Thermometer, he said.

No.

Yes.

She took her temperature because it was easier than arguing. 37.8. She showed him the reading as though it were an argument against him.

There, she said. *Not ill.*

That's a fever.

Barely.

He looked at her. *And while the cough is there, you talk less.*

I don't talk that much, she said — and coughed as she said it, which commented on the sentence itself.

He laughed, briefly and dryly. She laughed too, which brought on another cough.

You talk a great deal, he said.

That's not true.

It is.

They were quiet for a moment, and in the quiet was something neither of them wanted to name, because it was too good to touch.

All right then, she said finally. *You talk.*

That was a statement he hadn't expected, and he noticed he had no immediate answer ready. He was the one who listened. That had been so since the first phone call, since Göttingen, if he was honest. The other position was unfamiliar to him in this context.

About what? he said.

Whatever you like. A pause. *About the book.*

So he talked about the book.

Without knowing why, he went straight to the centre — the question of how academic institutions reproduce the social differences they claim to overcome. The mechanisms that

remain invisible because they sit in the form, not in the content. The smile of an examiner. The tone of an answer.

He talked about the way one sounds in certain rooms — not what one says, but how one says it, the ease with which one states an opinion without defending it. Not because one lacks arguments, but because no one demands them — because everyone present shares the same premises, knows the same books, has breathed the same air, and because in such rooms an opinion carries by its mere utterance, without justification, because the room has already legitimised it. This is not a consciousness one has — it is a body one is. And whoever doesn't bring that body must imitate it, and the imitation is always recognisable, not because it is poor, but because it shows effort where ease should be. The effort itself is the sign.

Can you actually measure that? she asked at some point.

Not directly. You can measure the effects. The form can't be isolated, but the consequences —

She coughed.

Don't talk, he said.

She made a gesture: *go on.*

He went on talking, and at some point he noticed something that made him pause briefly without stopping: she was listening, genuinely, but the way she listened was not quite the same as the way she talked about Pasolini or Pavese. There had been recognition there, terrain that was hers. Here there was fascination — but a fascination that came from outside, that was not reading the book but watching him read the book. He left it.

The book led him to the seminar, the seminar to Bourdieu — and then he heard the cough, which sounded deeper than an hour before.

Try to sleep a bit, he said.

It's four in the afternoon.

I know what time it is.

She looked at him for a long moment, and then she turned onto her side. He pulled the duvet over her, in the way one does things that go without saying. She closed her eyes, and he sat down in the armchair in front of the small writing desk and opened the manuscript on the laptop.

He worked for an hour. She slept.

In the evening, when the fever had eased a little, they sat beside each other again, and she asked about his mother. He had started on this earlier without noticing — the book had led him there without his having planned it — and now the conversation was back, as though it had been waiting for the continuation.

He talked, and she listened, and when the cough came he paused briefly until her breathing steadied, and went on.

His mother had been a classicist — had studied classical philology, done a doctorate, had a post that she gave up after the children were born. Not because she wanted to, but because that was the expectation then, and because his father had views about it, and because she was not a woman who fought against things, not in that respect. Before that she had spent a year in Athens as a student — that had not been a matter of course then, even in her world, but she had made it happen, in the quiet way he knew from her. She had never described the year in any detail; it had simply been there, a date like any other. She had always gone on working afterwards, voluntarily, in schools, in libraries, in projects that had no pay and therefore no compromises. The house had belonged to her, in the sense in which a house belongs to someone who fills it with books. Leopardi was there. Pavese was there. The Greeks were there, naturally. One read. That needed no reason and had no purpose beyond itself.

At some point she said, in the rougher voice the cough had given her: *We didn't have books lying around at home.*

That was all. A statement she had given no frame.

He didn't answer straight away. Then: *What was lying around?*

The television was on, she said. *Always. Even when no one was watching.* A short pause. *And on Saturdays we cleaned. That was the other ritual — everyone together, music from the radio, usually schlager. That sounds more idyllic than it was.*

He nodded. It arrived without landing — it was an image he took in without placing it. He filed it away, the way he filed away things he would think about later. He didn't think about it later.

Later she turned away from him, but pressed her back against his side so firmly that there was no doubt about what that meant. He had put his arm around her, and she had laid her hand on it, and they lay like that until her breathing became more even and the cough came less often.

After she had fallen asleep, he thought that he had talked more today than in all the months they had seen each other put together. He didn't think about what it meant that she had

received it the way she had. He took it as what it was: a day on which the conversation had moved in a different direction.

He closed his eyes.

Saturday morning he fetched breakfast from the buffet, as the days before. She ate little, drank tea, and the cough was still there but milder — a sign he registered without commenting on.

The conversation from the evening before was still in the room. They returned to it without calling it that: she asked about his mother, he answered, she listened, he went on. That was how it had a form.

Did she read to you much? she asked.

He thought. *Yes. Until I was too old to admit how much I liked it.*

And then?

Then I read on my own.

What?

He named a few titles, without emphasis, the way one names things that were simply there. He listened to himself doing it and heard the offhandedness of it — the names fell without ceremony, and he understood what that must mean to someone for whom that offhandedness was absent. But he didn't say so. He let the titles stand.

Was she worried, she asked after a pause, *when you went to Italy?*

No. He thought briefly. *That was — normal. That was what one did. My mother had done the same herself. That was the standard.*

He said this without weight, because it had no weight for him — it was simply the ground, not the point. He didn't hear how it sounded.

Around midday the fever rose again, not much, but enough. She lay down, on her own initiative this time, without him needing to say anything. He sat at the window, the laptop on his lap, and worked for a while. Then, when her breathing was even and the cough had stopped, he put on his jacket and went downstairs.

A small restaurant, three minutes on foot, the lunchtime trade nearly over. He ate alone, went through the emails that had been waiting since yesterday, replied to two. Outside was the weekend, grey and without ambition. He sat a while longer, drank coffee, and then went back.

She woke when he came into the room.

How long did I sleep?

Two hours.

She looked better than in the morning — not well, but better. The fever wasn't gone, but the colour in her face had changed.

He took off his jacket, laid it over a chair, and sat down in the armchair. The room was quiet, the muted light of the afternoon through the curtains.

She looked at him in a way he didn't know from her — calmer than usual, without the energy that normally prepared her sentences. The cough had taken her talking from her, and what remained was a different kind of listening: turned inward, without a stage. Then she said, without preamble: *And you? What are you like?*

He heard the question, and he heard also what was unusual about it — she had never asked him this in all these months. Not about the book, not about the seminar, and certainly not about what lay beneath. Now the question was simply there, direct, without staging, as though the fever had taken that from her too.

He looked at her for a moment, and then he laughed — the rare, dry laugh that was not an invitation, only a response. *That's a very direct question.*

I'm ill. I have the right to be direct.

That's not a valid rule.

It is today.

He stood up, went to the window, looked out briefly at the river, then down at the street, which had nothing particular to offer. Then he turned around. *I'm someone who prefers to understand things rather than feel them,* he said. *That's sometimes useful and sometimes not.*

And now?

Now, he said, *I'm in Cologne with you and don't have to answer that question.*

That was not evasion, even if it sounded like it. It was the most honest answer he could give.

He hadn't talked about his father yet. He made up for that in the late afternoon, when the fever had eased further and she was sitting up straighter, knees drawn up, the pillow at her back.

An architect, successful in the sense that counted outwardly — commissions, standing, a certain manner of presence. He had known how to stand in a room, how to speak, how to generate trust before the figures were examined. That was a skill, and it was also a trap: he had sometimes promised more than the design could deliver, had won commissions through persuasion and lost them through insufficient substance, and the legal claims had accumulated over the years without his ever quite understanding why.

His mother had absorbed all of this, always. Not loudly, not with reproach — she had simply settled the account, one way or another, and then things had gone on.

That sounds burdensome, she said.

For her. A pause. *For me it was mainly instructive. You learn to see that as two separate things: how someone sounds and how someone is.*

He heard the words after he had said them. *How someone sounds and how someone is.* It was the subject of the book, in one sentence, applied to his father. He thought this, briefly, and then didn't think it further.

In the evening, when the fever was gone and the cough came only occasionally, she said: *I could eat.*

The bistro was in the same block, five minutes. He helped her with her jacket, though she hadn't asked, because it was the obvious thing, and then they went downstairs.

Outside was Saturday evening, cool, the street busy but not pressing. They walked slowly, and he matched his pace to hers without noticing.

At the bistro she ordered soup, he something more substantial. The conversation found its footing on its own — it needed no run-up any more, those days had taken care of that. She talked about *La Bohème*, because the Mimì comparison from the day before was still in the room and because it was no longer only a joke.

I've never seen the opera live, she said.

He knew *La Bohème* well — Claudia had taken him through Puccini in the early years of their marriage, with the precision of a musicologist who left nothing to chance. He knew the music, knew the dramaturgy, knew the moment where Mimì coughs and smiles and means both at once.

He said none of this. He said: *Puccini doesn't leave you where you were. That's sometimes uncomfortable.*

How do you mean?

Because the music is more precise than you are.

Your wife knows about this, she said.

She's a musicologist. Verismo is her area. A pause. *She does it with a precision I respect and sometimes can't quite follow. Emotion as a subject of research.*

It was the first time he had spoken of Claudia — not to mark a boundary for Nadine, but simply because it belonged to what he was. He said it, and then went on eating.

I should hear it, she said finally. *Really hear it, I mean.*

Yes, he said. *You should.*

10

She was not someone who fell ill and stayed quiet about it. She knew this about herself — when the body needed something, she said so, when a sentence wasn't finished, she finished it, coughing or not. That was simply how she was.

But on Saturday morning, when she woke and the cough sat deeper than the evening before, there was something unexpected: no impatience. She lay there, and the room was quiet, and Christoph was still sleeping, and she thought nothing in the direction of the coming week, nothing in the direction of Bochum. The fever — not much, but there — made the world smaller, and the smaller world was more complete than the large one.

He woke, looked at her, asked whether she was still feverish. She said the fever was better, which was half true. He got up, fetched water, laid his hand briefly on her forehead — a wholly offhand gesture that was examination and touch at the same time — and said: *Still there.*

I know it's still there, she said.

I was only noting the fact.

You note a great many facts.

That's my job.

She laughed, and the cough came, and he looked at her in the way that wasn't criticism but still said: *you see.* She liked that.

He brought breakfast up to the room again. They ate without talking much, which was unusual for her and which still didn't feel wrong — more like the breathing between sentences that one normally doesn't notice.

The conversation from the evening before was still there without their having to summon it. He talked on — about his mother, about the reading aloud, about the titles he had read as a child, as though this were no particular list but simply a description of conditions. She listened, and what she heard was not the list itself but the offhandedness of it. He named Leopardi the way one says one has eaten bread.

At home the television had been on. She had told him that yesterday. Today she didn't say it again, because it had been said and the saying had been enough — not as a complaint, but as a contour, a line she had drawn for the first time with this sharpness. What occupied her was not the distance between their worlds, which she already knew, but something smaller and more precise: that he cited a year in Athens as a standard. As what one did. That was not a sentence she knew — not as a possibility, not as a memory, not as something that had existed in her world.

She asked about his mother, because the questions the cough had permitted her were not yet finished. He answered, and she listened.

Around midday the fever rose again, not much, but enough. She lay down, of her own accord this time. That was new — normally she would have waited until someone told her to, or until the body had no other choice. But the room was quiet and Christoph was there, and lying down carried no defeat.

She slept, and when she woke the first time he wasn't in the room. His laptop and his jacket were gone. She listened to the room for a moment, the sounds of the hotel from outside, and then let it stand. He had gone out because she was sleeping and because he could. That was not a signal. That was simply the afternoon. She fell back to sleep.

When he came back he still had his jacket on. He took it off, sat down in the armchair, and the room was again the room it had been.

She asked what he was like. That came out before she had planned it — not as a gesture, not as staging, but because the cough had taken her talking from her and what remained was a different kind of attention. He laughed, the rare, dry laugh, and said something about understanding and feeling, and then said he was in Cologne with her now and didn't have to answer the question. She heard that and let it stand, because it was the most honest answer he could give, and because she heard that.

In the evening the fever was gone. The cough remained, milder, persistent — but her voice was more or less her own again, and the hunger that made itself known was a good sign.

At the bistro she sat across from him and ordered soup, and the conversation found its footing on its own. She talked about *La Bohème*, because the Mimì comparison from the day before was still in the room and because it was no longer only a joke.

I've never seen the opera live, she said.

She was thinking of the two arias she knew — *Mi chiamano Mimì*, *Che gelida manina* — and told herself what she always told herself: that this was enough to know that this opera was hers. She knew that wasn't quite true. But it was true enough.

Once she had had the chance. Discounted tickets for the Aalto, a few years ago, a production everyone had said was exceptional. Markus had shaken his head and said he couldn't bear that trembling in the voice, that endless vibrating on every note, that felt like crying to order, like emotion displaying itself and thereby forfeiting any claim to credibility. And then his parents had also insisted on putting them up for the night, on giving up the marital bed so the children could be comfortable. That in turn Nadine hadn't wanted. They hadn't gone. She thought now, without putting it in those terms: that shouldn't have been the reason.

Puccini doesn't leave you where you were, he said. *That's sometimes uncomfortable.*

How do you mean?

Because the music is more precise than you are.

That was a formulation she held onto — not because she understood it, but because she felt it had touched something she couldn't yet name.

He talked about Claudia, incidentally, matter-of-factly — musicologist, *verismo*, a precision he respected and sometimes couldn't quite follow. He said it and then went on eating, as though it were a description of conditions and not a marking of limits. She didn't press further. She noticed that he had said it, and that the saying hadn't erected a barrier but was something else entirely: a form of honesty she hadn't expected.

I should hear it, she said finally. *Really hear it, I mean.*

Yes, he said. *You should.*

On Sunday the fever was gone, the cough only an occasional flicker. They packed without talking about it, each on their side of the room, and the packing took place in a silence that carried no tension — more the silence of things that have resolved themselves and that one doesn't need to touch again.

The farewell was in front of the hotel, just before midday. Outside the Rhine flowed past, grey and even. The lecture he had to give on Monday allowed no further extension.

He had walked her as far as the pavement. He set down her bag, she took the handle. Then he embraced her, his hand briefly at her back — the same gesture as always, but longer this time, a moment longer, that was nothing and everything. She smelled his jacket — wool, cool air, and beneath it something she couldn't name — and thought nothing particular, only that he had been there.

Take care of that cough, he said.

It'll go.

I know. Still.

He held his hand briefly to her arm, then let go and went back through the hotel door. She knew he would sit down somewhere in the lobby, open his laptop, wait until his train went. That was his afternoon, and it had a shape that had nothing to do with her any more.

She walked along the Rhine, towards the station. She didn't look back.

On the train she sat at the window and looked at the Rhineland, which in the evening light had a different colour than in the morning — warmer, less defined, as though the light were dissolving the edges. She was tired, in a way that sat deeper than the cough and deeper than the four nights — a tiredness that came from what had been, and that hadn't yet decided whether it was heavy or light.

She thought of his arm in the night, firm enough that she knew herself held, loose enough that she could breathe. She thought of his thumb at her back, whose movement had had no direction, no aim — and had led to one anyway, because that was what happened when someone stopped thinking about what they were doing. That was the point where one thing moved into the other, and she had read both as the same thing, and perhaps they were, and perhaps not. That hurt, in the quiet, precise way that makes no drama and is therefore heavier than drama.

She could have asked sooner — about the book, about his mother, about the family home. That was a thought that appeared briefly and then disappeared, because it pointed in a direction she didn't want to visit.

And then, beneath it, quieter, the other thing: the question that had no shape yet but was there. Whether what she had felt — the care, the listening, the nights, the small gestures that made no fuss — whether that had been the same for him. Not whether he loved her, that was too large a question. Only whether it had carried the same weight for him. She didn't know, and the not-knowing was the place where the circling would begin, not yet, but it would begin again.

The cough came, once, dry. She drank from the water bottle Christoph had put in her bag without comment, in the way he did things that went without saying.

E 'l naufragar m'è dolce, she thought, without looking for it. The line came as it always came. But this time it sounded different — less like something one displays, more like something one has. And at the same time, uneasily, the sense that the sinking was not only sweet. That it was also simply sinking.

She held the line in herself until the train arrived in Bochum.

The flat was quiet when she got in. Markus's jacket hung on the coat rack. She set down her bag, took off her shoes.

He was sitting on the wide sofa, the laptop on his knees, headphones round his neck. He looked up when she came in.

How was it?

Good, she said. *And I've picked up a cough.*

He stood up, came towards her, laid his hand briefly on her forehead — the same gesture as Christoph, but different, more familiar, without the precision of the unfamiliar. *No fever,* he said.

Was there briefly. It's gone.

I'll make you tea.

He went to the kitchen, and she heard the water running, the click of the kettle. The flat smelled of celery — he had made soup, at some point today, for himself and for her, because that was what he did.

She sat down on the two-seater and leaned her head back and closed her eyes. The room was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, in the way rooms become unfamiliar when one has been somewhere else and isn't quite back yet.

The four nights lay behind her, complete and without gap, a time of their own that needed no connection and found none. The circling hadn't begun yet. That would come later. Now there was only the quiet of the flat, and Markus in the kitchen, and the afterglow of Christoph's voice, the downward movement of his sentences, the place on her back where his hand had been.

Here, said Markus, and set the mug of tea on the coffee table.

Thanks, she said.

He sat down again, picked up the laptop, put on his headphones. That was his evening, and that was her evening, and that was how it was.

11

Three days after Cologne he called.

It was a video call like the others, and then it wasn't.

He sat in his study, earbuds in — Claudia behind the closed door of her own study, the silence of the hallway between them. The earbuds were a ritual he had long since stopped explaining to himself.

Nadine was talking about Calvino — *Le città invisibili* this time — and the voice came through the earbuds directly, warm, with that particular energy that recharged itself with every sentence. The rising melody of her sentences, immediate at his ear, but no longer with the breath behind it that had also touched his skin. He heard that before he heard what she was saying. The listening always began there, even now, still.

She spoke well about the book, better than he had expected — the structure, the idea of the invisible cities as mirrors of a single one. That was genuine reading. Then she said something about Calvino's relationship to Borges, about the structural kinship, and he heard this and asked, incidentally, without plan: *Which Borges texts do you have in mind when you say that?*

A small pause.

Well, the Labyrinths mainly, like. She said. *That — that folding together of reality and construction, everyone knows that. Calvino has something similar going on.*

Which text specifically?

A longer pause. The melody of her voice dampened, the pace slowed — the small hesitation he knew, the breath before the sentences reset themselves. *The Labyrinths are just — she broke off, started again — Borges is hard to single out there, like, it's more of an overall feeling, a gesture that Calvino takes over.*

A gesture, he said. His voice fell, quickly, closing.

Yes.

He let that stand.

What he saw here was clearer than what she had said about Engels in Cologne, clearer than what she had said about Moravia in the autumn. Not because the gap was larger, but because the pattern now allowed no other reading: a name, a concept, a claim about a connection, and then, when he pressed, no text, no argument, no concrete example. Only the gestural, the atmospheric, the retreat into the general.

She didn't know. That was the result, to the extent he had one. He thought: *she doesn't know* — and not: *she can't know.* That was a distinction he didn't make, and he didn't notice that he wasn't making it. The bookshelf was in his sightline. He didn't look at it.

He had considered it possible that she was aware of it — that the sidestepping was a technique she had developed and deployed, with an inner knowledge of the gap. That would have been simple: conscious deception, recognisable limit, a woman who knows what she's doing.

This was something else. The gap was genuinely not visible to her. The boundary between what she had and what she claimed to have didn't exist in her — so completely didn't exist that claiming and knowing were indistinguishable to her. The gestural was her knowledge.

And then there was something else he saw more clearly than before: she wanted him to engage with her intellectuality because her intellectuality was what she defined herself by. That was what she took to be her core identity. When he listened and responded, he was not only confirming the conversation — he was confirming her as the person she believed herself to be. The erotic element with her was inseparable from the intellectual, not because she was particularly intellectual, but because intellect was her erotic medium. With her, the body was always mediated through the mind. He observed this, and found it strange in a way he didn't fully name: with him it had been the other way round. He had heard the voice, and the body had responded before the mind had asked. The desire had been there first, the placing afterwards. But he didn't pursue that thought further.

That was more complex than if she had consciously deceived him. And it was interesting enough to catch him — still. He held the thought for a while without moving. It was — he looked for the word, and the word that came surprised him with its simplicity: beautiful. Not in the sentimental sense. In the sense of: here was something he had not seen in quite this way before, and the seeing had a quality he didn't want to shake off.

And yet: he heard her voice through the earbuds, and the conversation held on, and he listened — not only because he was observing, but because he couldn't stop. The listening had a different note now than in the months before: he listened knowing what he knew. That was not a contradiction he named. It was simply there, a fact.

After the call he sat at his desk and thought about another word that had come to him without his having looked for it.

Sprezzatura.

He knew the concept — Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*, the art of making effort appear as ease, of executing the difficult as though it were natural. For Castiglione it was a technique, a learnable posture, something the courtier had to work for and then could no longer show as worked for.

With Nadine it was the opposite — and that was precisely the paradox that wouldn't let him go. She had *sprezzatura* without knowing the concept, without having decided to conceal effort, because there was no effort that needed concealing — the gap itself had disappeared, and with it any possibility of noticing the practising. She sidestepped without knowing she was sidestepping. She produced ease without knowing it was production.

That was more beautiful than deception. It was also sadder.

He let that stand. He moved his jaw, once, carefully. The place beneath the left temporomandibular joint had been dull since morning. He had noticed it on waking and then not thought about it again.

Alongside this, though, quieter, lay something he was less willing to look at.

He understood that she had warmth — genuine warmth, the enthusiasm for Pasolini, the moment with the Ginzburg box, the laugh that came from the stomach. And yet: the pattern he saw — the mirroring, the need for confirmation, the retreat when the gap became visible — had a structure that went beyond quirk. He was not a clinician, he knew that, and he mistrusted

himself in this direction. But the thought arrived, briefly, uninvited, and didn't entirely disappear even after he had pushed it aside.

He let it lie, without giving it a name.

In Cologne she had asked about his book, about his mother, about the family home — but the illness had forced the asking, the silence the cough had imposed on her. The normal conversation, the conversation without fever and without an arrangement to listen, ran differently. It still ran in the same direction: towards her, towards her reading, towards what she brought. That she had asked about him in Cologne was an outlier, not a change of pattern. He registered this steadily: she wanted him to see and confirm her intellectual world. What he thought, what occupied him, what he knew — that was not a subject that interested her in ordinary conversations. And he didn't understand why.

In the pause after he had asked *which text specifically*, he had heard her voice — not the content, the voice itself, the small hesitation, the breath, the fresh start. What he had heard in it: uncertainty.

That was a simple word — not sociological, not clinical, an everyday word that didn't advance the analysis and was nonetheless the only one that remained. He had been looking for a placing and had ended with a description, without noticing that those were not the same thing.

He didn't notice that. He only noticed the word, and that it named the matter, as far as he could see.

The bookshelf was in his sightline. He didn't look at it.

What he thought about instead was the paradox, once more, briefly: a woman who makes effort appear as ease without knowing the term for it. That was the most genuine thing about her — not the knowledge that was missing, but the form in which the missing became invisible. That was beautiful. The admiration was still there, but it was no longer carrying everything. That showed in the moment when he opened the manuscript and was immediately in the middle of it.

The section on symbolic capital in academic fields, which had been waiting two weeks for revision. He read the first sentence, read the second, and at the third he saw how it needed to be rewritten, and wrote.

12

It had started in November, or actually earlier, but November was when she noticed it.

The first time had been a conversation about Proust — she had never read *In Search of Lost Time* in full, she hadn't told him that. She had said she knew the first volume well, and he had asked which passage stayed with her most, and she had described the madeleine scene, the most famous moment in the whole novel, the moment everyone knew even without having read the book, and he had asked: *And the passage after that?*

She didn't know what came after. She had carried the conversation on, about memory, about Proust's relationship to time, and that had worked, but the question had stayed, after the call, small and persistent.

The second time had been a conversation about Bachmann. Again a follow-up question, precise, aimed at something she couldn't grasp.

By the third time she had stopped believing it was coincidence.

The conversation in the second week of November was the one in which the feeling condensed for her, without her being able to name it, into certainty. She had started talking about Handke — *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* — and the conversation was good, genuinely good, and that was what made it oppressive: it was good and at the same time weighted, the weight lying over the good like a second layer one could feel without being able to touch.

She spoke more slowly than usual. The sentences became shorter, the melody flatter — fewer rises, more silence between sentences. She left more air, because before she moved on she wanted to hear how he responded. She listened to his voice, the falling movement of his sentences, and held onto it — still the same voice, still the same finality, but the falling was quicker than before, the sentences closed faster. She noticed this without naming it.

What interests you most about it? he asked, at some point, after she had been talking about the book for several minutes.

That was the kind of question that didn't have to be a trap. It could be curiosity, it could be conversation — it could simply be him, his way of hearing her.

But she heard something in the question that was a shade too precise for pure curiosity. As though he were waiting for something. As though the question had a floor beneath which there was another floor.

She answered, about the book, about his mother, about Handke's relationship to language as rescue and failure simultaneously, and that was true, that was genuinely the most extraordinary thing about the book, and she said so, and he listened.

Aye, he said.

One word. She received it, and this time she received it differently from before: not as confirmation, but as a waiting.

After the call she put down the tablet, got up from the two-seater, went to the kitchen, sat down there, and thought, in the way that was not productive thinking but circling. It always started at the same place and never arrived anywhere else.

The place where it started: *What is he testing?*

The feeling was there, clear, almost physical: the feeling of being observed, by someone who was not an adversary, not cold, but who had a distance that hadn't been there before. A distance that felt like a method. And beneath that, as physical fact rather than thought: she couldn't stop circling because she couldn't stop wanting. The circling was not the same as indifference. Only someone who genuinely wanted could circle like this.

She thought: *he's testing whether I'm honest. Whether I say what I actually think, or what I'm supposed to think. Whether the feelings I show are the ones I have.*

That was the direction that had room in her. Another direction — *perhaps he's testing my knowledge* — appeared briefly, a half-thought that only flickered and then didn't complete itself, because it would have touched the foundation: the possibility that the knowledge she had was not the same as the knowledge he knew, that the distance between them was not the distance between sincerity and insincerity but a different distance, a structural one, one that — no. The thought didn't finish. A sapiosexual woman could be sincere or insincere, but she could not be intellectually insufficient. That was the foundation, and the foundation was not negotiable, not even in the circling, not even at night in the kitchen.

And then, still more fleeting, still briefer: that it might be too late, that he might already know what he was looking for. Pushing that thought aside took less than a breath.

The circling went on, at the same place, because there was only that one place where it could run.

Just after midnight she heard the front door — Markus, footsteps in the hall, the quiet setting down of his jacket. He saw her sitting at the kitchen table and asked: *Still up?*

Yes, she said.

He filled a glass of water, drank it half empty, set it on the draining board. Then he looked at her again, in the way she knew: briefly, without demand. *I've finished a new episode,* he said. *They*

never found the killer. That was thirty years ago, imagine. He shook his head slightly, in the way he said such things — without drama, a statement, nothing more, which he carried into the flat the way other people carry shopping.

Everything all right? he asked.

Yes, she said. *Couldn't sleep.*

He nodded, touched her shoulder briefly as he passed, and went to the bedroom.

She stayed sitting a while longer. Markus didn't ask when he knew the answer — and he usually knew it. That wasn't coldness, that was the way one asked where they came from: directly, without detour, without the surrounding. When he didn't know, he asked; when he knew, he was quiet. Christoph asked differently. Christoph asked in a way that meant the answer only came into being in the answering.

The circling began again, at the same place.

The next call was a Thursday, and she was prepared — not consciously prepared, not with a plan, but with a different quality of attention than before. She listened now in a new way: not only to what he said, but to what he asked.

They talked about Döblin, about *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a reading she had started in a burst of energy the week before and abandoned after fifty pages, not because it was bad but because it demanded too much, for that time, for that kind of evening.

Too much how? he asked.

Too loud, she said. *Too many voices at once. It's absolutely brilliant, like, but I need something quieter right now.*

He let that stand without pressing further.

She waited for him to press. He didn't. And then she noticed something: before he fell silent he had briefly raised his hand to his throat — a small movement, almost nothing, the fingers briefly at the back of his neck, then gone again. She didn't know this movement from him. She registered it without knowing what to do with it. He looked more tired than usual, slightly flatter in the image, his gaze minimally more absent. She set this impression aside immediately, because setting it aside was easier than the question that was announcing itself: whether it had anything to do with her.

That he hadn't pressed surprised her, and she didn't know what it meant. It was possible that he believed her. It was possible that he had decided not to ask this time. It was possible that the pattern she was sensing wasn't there at all, and that she was seeing something that didn't exist.

Then she talked about Handke, back to *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, about a passage that genuinely occupied her: the passage where Handke writes that language had ceased to be a possibility for his mother. *That's really the heart of it,* she said, and that came out of her, not as a gesture but as what she meant, with a flatter melody than usual, less rise, more silence. *When language stops being a possibility, that's the end before the end comes.*

He was quiet.

Then: *That's precise.*

Thank you, she said.

Don't mention it, he said.

The silence afterwards had a different quality from the silence before. She waited for it to dissolve. It didn't dissolve entirely.

The call ended earlier than usual. *Right then,* she said, her voice rising, searching for something at the end, not finding it. No further sentence. He said *good.* She pressed end.

She didn't notice that the farewell had got shorter. She only noticed that the tablet was lying on the two-seater and the living room was quiet and the circling had started again, at the same place, with the same question.

What is he testing?

And beneath it, quieter, more insistent, a question she wasn't quite asking yet, but that was there, as a shadow of the first: *And what would he find, when he was done with the testing?*

She didn't want an answer to that second question. That was why she didn't ask it fully.

13

The seminar that Monday ran differently from the weeks before — more alive, with an energy he hadn't produced. A student, Yara, had drawn a connection in her presentation on Goffman's concept of stigma to Bourdieu's field theory that surprised him: not wrong, but coming from an angle he had never used himself.

That's a good approach, he had said — and then developed the implication for the group, twenty minutes of teaching that had come from Yara's thought and not from him, and the twenty minutes had carried the seminar.

At the close he had thought, not addressed to anyone: *these questions, the questions about origin and habitus and the price of moving up, are fei good.*

Nadine got in touch at nine.

He answered — the door was ajar. The earbuds were in the drawer. He had left them there that evening, had registered this and then not thought further about it. Whether he had forgotten to charge them, or whether he hadn't wanted to charge them, was a question he didn't ask himself.

He heard her voice, and the voice was as it always was: warm, direct, with that particular energy. The rising melody of the sentences, now with the slight distance of the loudspeaker — he heard it, and he listened. But the hearing was different from the first months: the melody was now information, not body. The seeking of confirmation contained in the intonation, which he had once read as vitality, was now a datum like the other data. He noticed this without judging it.

She talked about Silone — *Fontamara*, the peasants, the silence, the dignity of a working-class milieu that knew no language but the one it had. She talked about this without distance, in the way he knew and that still made him pay closer attention: this was recognition, not study. Not an analytical view from outside, but the speaking of someone for whom this terrain was familiar — not as an object of contemplation, but as what one had grown up with. *She knows this from inside,* he thought. And then he didn't think further, because knowing from inside was for him a quality, not a category, a feature of this woman, not the result of conditions.

Then she talked about Bachmann — *Malina*, which she was reading — and she spoke well about it, genuine enthusiasm, the book had got to her, he could hear that. And then she said: *What interests me is that relationship between the I and Malina, like — it's like a split, almost a therapeutic one, the I as the feeling part and Malina as the ordering, the controlling. It's actually a very classic borderline dynamic.*

He heard this, and the cue landed — but differently from the Engels moment in Cologne, differently from the Moravia moment in the autumn. Not the question about the substance behind the term, not the looking for the gap. He knew the gaps by now. What interested him was the word itself: borderline. She had applied it to a character, to an I in a novel — but he heard it and thought about something he had been carrying for the past weeks, still

unformulated, not yet quite taken seriously: that what he observed in her — the mirroring, the need for confirmation, her failure to show genuine interest in him — was perhaps not a quirk but a pattern. He didn't know. He hadn't been watching her under that heading long enough to know. And now she had introduced a concept into the conversation that pointed in that direction — unintentionally, incidentally, as she used concepts. That interested him.

Borderline how? he asked. Calm, no edge. His voice fell quickly, the sentence closed and waited.

A small pause. *Well, that splitting of the I. That inability to integrate feeling and structure.*

Is that how Bachmann described it?

That's the reading I know, she said. *It's a very widespread reading.*

He let that stand, and then she changed the subject again.

That was the fourth pirouette of this kind — after the Moravia moment in the autumn, after the Engels moment in Cologne, after the Borges moment a few weeks ago. The pattern: a name, a concept, a claim about a connection, and then, when he pressed, the retreat into the general. *It's a very widespread reading.* That was not a reading. That was a gesture in the direction of a reading.

He thought briefly about Cologne — about the questions she had asked him, about the listening the illness had forced. That had been genuine, that was certain. But it had also been what it was: an exceptional situation, a condition that had come from outside. The normal conversation, the conversation without fever and without an arrangement to listen, ran as it always ran — in her direction, towards her reading, towards what she brought. Cologne had not corrected the pattern. It had briefly interrupted it.

After the call he sat at his desk, and the place beneath the left temporomandibular joint was pressing more strongly today than usual — no longer merely dull, but with a pull that went up into the neck, on the left side, where the muscle had not fully relaxed for weeks. He turned his head, once, carefully to the right. It didn't help much. He left it.

And then, after the call, the usual: he opened the manuscript, read the first sentence, read it again, left it. He got up, went to the kitchen, drank water, came back. The sentence was still the same. Claudia had asked him that morning whether he had slept well — he had nodded, but she had looked at him in a way that showed that had been the wrong answer.

He needed an explanation. Not because the explanation would change anything, but because the unexplained wouldn't let him go, because he was someone who placed things, and because this thing was resisting.

Borderline — he thought the word she had used herself, and tried to apply it to her seriously. Instability of self-image: possible, the oscillation between showing and concealing, between enthusiasm and retreat when the gap became visible. Affect regulation: hard to assess, he only knew her in certain situations. The split between idealisation and devaluation: he saw the idealisation — herself as sapiosexual, him as the man who confirmed her intellectuality. But devaluation he had not seen yet. That was a gap in the picture, and he was aware that he was not a psychiatrist, that he was working with half-knowledge, from seminar reading and what one simply knew from having lived long enough in academic contexts. That was not a solid foundation. Still he didn't drop the thought, because he had nothing better at that moment.

Then *histrionic* — older, less in circulation, but more sharply defined than borderline, which had by now accumulated so many meanings it barely had one. The need for attention, the theatrical quality of the self-presentation, knowledge as stage — that fitted, at first glance. But then the counter-argument, which arrived as soon as he looked more carefully: a histrionic personality was ultimately shallow in its emotionality, affects changing quickly, yesterday's enthusiasm replaced by today's indignation. Nadine's enthusiasm was not that. Pasolini had been with her for years, Pavese equally, the Ginzburg moment had not been an effect. That was substance, even if it wasn't the substance she claimed. The category didn't fit.

The paradox remained open, and he left it open — but the leaving-open frustrated him, in a way he didn't fully name. He was looking for an explanation that would close the picture, that would bring what he saw into a form he could work with. And at the same time, beneath that, something he was even less willing to name: that the explaining would have an end, and that he didn't want the end. Not yet.

Again he noticed, after the call, what he had noticed before: she had not once asked about his work. Not about the seminar, not about the book, not about the paper he had once mentioned. That was no longer a single datum. That was a pattern, as regular as her calling, as reliable as her enthusiasm. The days in Cologne didn't count against it — the asking there had needed the silence her illness had imposed on her. It had not been curiosity that had come from within her. It had been curiosity the cough had released.

He saw her very clearly in that moment, and the seeing had a loneliness: what he saw and what she showed him were two different things, and there was no one he could have told what he saw — least of all her.

Then, briefly, the discomfort: the testing, the pressing, the mapping of gaps in a conversation she took to be something else — that was ethically questionable, that was not in doubt. But then the counterweight, which arrived before the discomfort could settle: she had never asked

who he was. She had used him as a mirror, month after month, and the mirror was supposed to shine and be silent and confirm — and at the same time she had claims he felt without their ever having been stated. That was not an equilibrium he was obliged to maintain.

He knew that was a rationalisation. He let it stand anyway.

He stood up, went to the bookshelf. Bourdieu, third shelf from the top. His hand reached before he had decided — muscle memory.

He leafed through, found the passage without looking: the paragraph about habitus as incorporated history, about cultural capital as the inherited and the acquired, about the upward-mobile who has the gesture and not always the substance, about the in-between space that is not a space but a condition. He read the paragraph and thought about Nadine — the gesture, the fire, the sidestepping that was no technique. Then he read the next paragraph. And then a thought announced itself — his father, not for the first time that evening, but now without detour: his father had won commissions through the conviction in his voice, through plans that were larger than the building could sustain, had used relationships as raw material, had never been able to distinguish self-image from external impression. Claims had accumulated over the years, and his mother had absorbed it, again and again, without his father ever understanding why he attracted them. He knew this. He stopped there, because he never went further at this point, hadn't for years, because there was no purpose in going there.

He laid the book on the table, spine up, open. He didn't put it away. He left it lying — as though the question were not yet settled. It was settled.

Something in him contracted, briefly, in a way he immediately pushed aside — not far enough. What remained was not a thought, more a condition he knew and didn't name. He pushed it in a different direction, because that was easier: he was annoyed. With himself, with the whole evening, with the categories he had opened and closed again, borderline, histrionic, as though he had nothing better to do, as though he were a first-year student who mistakes clinical psychology for a toolkit for his own life. He was a sociologist. He had opened Bourdieu and put it down again. He knew how categories work, how they blind, how they distort what they describe by naming it. And yet here he sat, diagnosing a woman he desired with concepts he half-knew, on a territory where he had no business.

That was ridiculous. It genuinely annoyed him.

He sat down, opened the manuscript on the screen, found the thread, wrote.

Bourdieu lay on the table, the pages slightly curved from being opened so often. He didn't look at it.

14

She had been putting it off for a week, the question, the conversation she would have to have. For a week they had talked as usual, about books, about Bachmann, about a film she had seen, and that had been good, had held, and yet the other layer had been there the whole time, the feeling of being watched that she couldn't think away.

Everything in its own time, she thought on a Tuesday evening before she called, the tablet on her lap, Markus still in the studio. That wasn't her phrase, it was something she'd heard somewhere, and it didn't fit particularly well, but it was there, and she let it stand because it named the hesitation.

She knew the conversation would be difficult. She knew that, and she called anyway, because not calling was worse than calling — and because one only has difficult conversations when the outcome is not a matter of indifference. She tapped his name.

I need to ask you something, she said, after the first few exchanges. No run-up, no detour — that would have made it worse.

Ask, he said.

She spoke slowly, at first. The sentences were short and sat properly, the melody flat, every word-end fully pronounced. She was being careful.

I've had the feeling lately that you're — examining me. I don't know how else to put it. Not critically, that's not the word. But you ask questions that feel like — like you're waiting for something. Like you're waiting for a particular answer, and when it doesn't come, you take note of that.

Silence.

That's a strong word, he said. *Examining.* His voice fell, quickly, closing.

I don't have a better one, she said.

Do you have an example?

That was the question she had expected, and yet she wasn't ready for it for a moment. She thought of Borges, of the labyrinths, of the *which text specifically.* She thought of Bachmann, of the borderline concept, of the brief silence that had followed. And beneath that, as a shadow, barely formulable: why did these questions feel like traps? What were they asking for that she didn't have? The thought didn't complete itself. The shadow was there. The thought wasn't.

When I'm talking to you about something, she said, *and you press — it sometimes doesn't feel — it doesn't feel like curiosity. It feels like testing.*

I press because I'm interested in what you think, he said.

That was smooth and sounded true and was perhaps also true, and that was the problem: she couldn't say whether it was evasion or explanation, because both would sound the same. She felt that something was in her hands that she couldn't grasp, that slipped through her fingers, not because he was taking it away but because it had no form that would have offered any resistance to the grasping.

I believe you, she said. *But I also think there's something else there. And I'd like to know what.*

What do you think it is?

That was the next refraction, and she heard it, and she answered anyway, because if she wanted to stay in this conversation she had no other choice.

She spoke more quickly now, the control loosening, audibly, the melody rising again, the sentences searching for something at the end: *I think you want to know if I'm honest. Whether I say what I actually think, or what I'm supposed to think. Whether what I show you is what I am.* A short pause. *That would be a fair question, like. I ask myself that too. But it feels like I don't get a chance there, more like the result is already — like you already know what you'll find.*

Silence. The kind of silence of his that wasn't empty.

She looked at him on the screen, and for the first time in this conversation she noticed something beyond his words: he was sitting slightly more crooked than usual, his left shoulder drawn minimally forward, and once — briefly, almost nothing — he moved his head to the right, carefully, in the way one tries to release a tension. She knew this movement by now. He didn't know she knew it. She read it the way she read things he didn't say: as impatience, as withdrawal, as further evidence that the conversation was weighing on him and that she was the cause of that weight. It didn't occur to her that there might be another explanation.

I don't know what I'll find, he said. That was calm, the voice fell quickly, without undertone, without proving anything in either direction.

I don't quite believe that, she said.

Why not?

Because you always know what you think. That's — that's one of the things I value in you. But right now it sounds like evasion.

Silence.

Maybe it is, he said. *I don't know whether what I think is what you want to hear.*

His voice fell as he said that — quickly, closed, finished. The sentence's melody made a statement, it didn't ask forgiveness. Nadine heard this without knowing she heard it.

That was the most honest answer she received from him in this conversation, and it was still not an answer. Christoph had admitted nothing and denied nothing, he had steered the conversation in a direction that felt open and wasn't, and it was done with such precision that Nadine couldn't say whether it was intentional or simply his way, and perhaps those were the same thing.

Wat I want to hear, she said — the *wat* came without warning, and she let it stand — *is the truth. Even if it's uncomfortable. I'm not someone who can't handle the truth.*

I know that, he said.

Then say it.

And then, for a moment, there was another question announcing itself before she had fully thought it — whether he might simply rather talk about himself, whether she was boring him with what she brought, whether that was the reason he had grown so quiet lately. The question was almost there. And then it retreated, inwardly, before the thought was finished — because if he were to start talking, about his book, about his work, about what actually occupied him, a distance would become visible that had so far had no shape. And she would have had to listen, really listen, and in doing so it would become apparent whether she could keep up. That was the reason. Not the direction the question was pointing. The distance behind it.

The memory came, and she let it stand a moment — not because she wanted to, but because she couldn't defend herself against it: in Cologne, when the cough had forbidden her to talk, she had asked — about the book, about his mother, about the family home — and he had answered, at length, without hesitation, in a way that showed he had only been waiting to be asked. That had not been a locked room. That was a man who had talked about himself when asked, who had opened up because she wanted it, and who had given her something she hadn't yet been able to place. She knew how it was done. She had known since Cologne, and that was what hurt now: not the not-knowing, but its opposite. That she could. That she simply didn't.

She didn't do it now either. She let the memory stand and then pushed it aside, because the asking pointed in the same direction as the thought she had just pushed aside — and because in both directions the same thing waited at the end.

The truth is, he said, *that I don't want to do without these conversations. And that I sometimes press because I genuinely want to know what you think. Not because I'm waiting for a result.*

That was complete and smooth and left no opening. Nadine heard it and knew she could either carry on with that or stop, and she chose to stop, not because she believed what he said, but because carrying on would yield the same thing in different sentences.

Fine, she said.

Not: *I believe you.* Only: *fine.*

They talked for a while about Bachmann, because the conversation needed something to end on. Nadine spoke with a care she consciously imposed on herself — precise, without breakthroughs, the melody flat, every word-end controlled, because she didn't want to show herself uncontrolled in this conversation again.

At some point she laughed once, briefly, at the end of something she'd said she wasn't sure about. The social laugh. She heard it herself and didn't like it.

Right then, she said finally — and the voice went up, no close, a question without a question mark.

Yes, he said.

We'll keep talking.

Aye, he said.

She pressed end.

The conversation had happened, that was certain. What it had yielded was less certain. She sat on the two-seater, the tablet beside her, and thought: *he said nothing. He said everything one can say without saying anything.*

And she hadn't got what she wanted — not the confirmation, not the denial. Only the continuing, which Christoph always offered, which was open and had no shape, no contour one could hold onto.

She got up and went straight to bed. The circling would come, she knew that before she turned off the light. It came.

This time at a new place, a sentence she wasn't quite thinking yet: *What would he have had to say for me to believe him?*

She found no answer.

Just after midnight she heard the front door — Markus, footsteps in the hall. He didn't come straight to the bedroom but stopped briefly in the kitchen, the light went on and off again. Then he came in, undressed, lay down beside her. She pretended to be asleep.

The next morning the letter from the journalism school was no longer on the desk. He had said he'd turned it down — too little money, too uncertain a position, he'd stick with the podcast, at least he knew what he had there. She had nodded. What he had, she knew too.

15

The confrontation — he didn't call it that, but that was what it had been — he had thought through several times in the days that followed, not because the conversation unsettled him, but because it was material he hadn't yet fully placed.

What he thought was precise, and he trusted that precision.

Nadine had sensed that she was being observed. That was interesting. Not the fact that she had sensed it — that had been predictable, anyone questioned long enough develops a feeling for the structure of the questions — but the conclusions she had drawn. She had read the testing as an interrogation of her sincerity, her feelings, her reliability as a person. Not as a test of her knowledge. That was the point at which her reading was entirely wrong, without her knowing it.

He sat at his desk and thought this through, in the calm way he thought through things that were closed or needed to be closed. He thought about Nadine, and the thought had no physical temperature. He thought about the conversation, about the structure of the conversation, about what the conversation confirmed. That was all.

The bookshelf was in his sightline. He didn't look at it.

The psychiatric hypotheses had not held. That was, if he was honest, the result. Borderline hadn't fitted, because the devaluation had never come — Nadine had idealised, always, him, the books, the conversation, but the other side of the split had not shown itself, and without it the concept didn't hold. Histrionic hadn't fitted, because a histrionic personality was unstable in its emotionality, yesterday's enthusiasm replaced by tomorrow's indifference — and Nadine's enthusiasm was not that. Pasolini had been with her for years. The Ginzburg moment had not been an effect. And narcissistic hadn't fitted, because a narcissistic personality loves things insofar as it sees itself reflected in them — and Nadine's passion was for the things themselves, not for her own effect in relation to them. The categories had not closed. He had wanted them to close, and they had refused.

So he changed register. He did this without noticing that he was doing it.

Sprezzatura — the word came back, as it had come before, around the time of the Borges conversation. But this time he didn't leave it at the paradox that had fascinated him then — the woman who makes effort appear as ease without knowing she does it. This time he thought it further, sociologically, the way he should have thought it when the word first appeared.

What he had then read as a paradox of character was not a paradox of character. It was a paradox of position. The *sprezzatura* that Castiglione had described as a learnable technique of the courtier was, in Nadine's case, the opposite of learned — it was incorporated, inscribed, habitus in the literal sense: a posture that passed itself off as nature because it had no other choice. Whoever operates in rooms for which they were not trained learns the sidestepping, because sidestepping is the only means of surviving in those rooms. The ease he had admired was not ease. It was labour that had forgotten itself.

That was sharper than anything he had thought about her in these months.

He noticed he wasn't done with it yet.

The sidestepping was a means. The question was: to what end? What did the strategy need in order to function?

It needed a mirror.

He thought this, and it was immediately clear, with the clarity of things one has known for a long time that have simply not yet found their way into words. Nadine had needed him as a mirror — his reaction, his confirmation, the gaze that reflected back to her what she wanted to see. That was not narcissism, that was something else: the connection between recognition and self-image, the fact that the self can only stabilise itself through confirmation by others — and that there are positions from which this confirmation is never a given, because the structures in which one operates don't make provision for one. Honneth had described this, more precisely than any psychiatric category. And in this language Nadine's search for the mirror was not a personality trait. It was a rational response to a structural condition.

That was right. That was genuinely right. He felt the parts fitting — this was not intuition but an argument that carried itself.

And then, before he could stop: one more level.

The last datum. The one he found hardest, not because it was unclear, but because it was too close.

She had eroticised intellect — not as a strategy, not consciously, but because intellect was the medium in which recognition became possible for her. Desire had attached itself to what

afforded access: to the voice that formulated precisely, to the gaze that understood, to the confirmation that showed one belonged. Illouz had described this — the intertwining of cultural capital and erotic desire, the way certain milieus produce certain objects of desire, the way desire itself is formed in milieu-specific ways without those who desire knowing it. In this language Nadine's sapiosexual structure was not what he had long seen in it — a peculiarity, a feature that belonged to her like her voice or her hands. It was the result of a condition: desire forms itself where recognition is possible, and if intellect is the only route to recognition in a particular world, then intellect becomes erotic. That was the mechanism. That was the explanation.

The picture was complete. Every part in its place, every concept the right one. He recapitulated this for a moment, and what he felt was not relief — it was the quiet satisfaction of someone who has thought a difficult analysis through to the end and knows it holds.

And then, a moment later, something he immediately pushed aside: that his own structure, if he was honest, was not so different. That he had heard the voice before he heard the content. That his body had responded before the mind had asked. That what had held him — the energy, the fire, the vehemence — was on his part a form of desire that had attached itself to something he took for quality, and that the question of whether that was his quality or his position was a question he didn't ask.

He pushed that aside. That was a different question.

He noted something else, incidentally, that belonged in the reckoning: she had never once asked about his work in all these months. Not about the book, not about the seminar, not about what occupied him. In the new language he had just found, that was not a reproach and not a datum — it was consistent. The mirror doesn't ask about the person behind it. The mirror reflects.

He didn't think about what he had given her — the listening, the mirroring, the readiness to always leave the conversation with her, month after month. He didn't think about it because the thought would have pointed in a direction he didn't take that evening.

And then, in the quiet after these reflections, very briefly, his father. Not as a memory, but as a structure: the room that filled, the conviction that grew louder as the substance grew thinner, the commissions won through language and lost through substance. The desire that had attached itself to what afforded access — not intellect, in his father's case, but presence, gesture, the assured speaking about things whose substance was sometimes thinner than the

language covering them. That was a different form of the same — he stopped there, because he never went further at this point, hadn't for years, because there was no purpose in going there. The thought that had announced itself didn't complete itself.

Nadine's number appeared on the phone. He saw the number, let it ring — once, twice. He heard the ringing as ringing, as a sound that stood in the room and then stopped. Then he turned the phone face down on the table.

No hesitation. No afterthought. That was the end of a sequence that had found its close.

He looked at the screen and opened the manuscript. The final section of the third chapter, which had been waiting a week for revision. He read the opening sentence, then the second, then he saw how the paragraph needed to be rewritten, and wrote.

A sentence came, without his looking for it, as reflex, not as thought, only as a statement: *That's just how it is.*

He wrote on.

On the shelf, third row from the top, stood Bourdieu. He didn't look at it. He didn't need it. The analysis was done. Sociologically clean, self-contained. The question she didn't ask was not a question he missed.

Too much need — that was what remained of Nadine when everything else was stripped away. The diagnosis, in three words. He let it stand.

He slept soundly that night. He only noticed this the next morning, in the absence of the dull pull beneath the left temporomandibular joint that he had known in recent weeks as the first sign of the day. He got up, moved his jaw once, carefully. Nothing. He didn't think further about it.

16

She had bought the ticket on a Thursday evening after Markus had gone down to the studio. No great decision, no weighing up — the opposite of that. She had picked up the tablet, opened the rail app, typed in Bochum-Erlangen, and the ticket had been there, for the next morning, and she had bought it because buying was easier than going on waiting.

He had not answered the video call twice. Had not replied to two messages. The circling had new material — the confrontation from November, Christoph's evasion, the speed with which

the last calls had ended — and it started as it always started: *what did I do wrong.* It never arrived anywhere else.

Right then, she thought, and that was not confidence, that was exhaustion formulating itself as a decision. *I'll just go.*

The train journey took four and a half hours. She sat at the window and watched the Ruhr gradually stop, and then fields, and then towns that always disappeared again soon. She didn't think about books, not about Bachmann, not about what she would say to him. She thought about his voice, about the falling movement of his sentences that she knew and now missed — the finality, the calm, the downward pull. She thought about his hands on the table in Cologne. She thought: she wanted to see him. Not talk, not explain, not confront — just see. As though that would be enough.

That wasn't naive. His presence would be the only reliable information: if she saw him, the circling would stop, because the circling came from not knowing, and if one saw, one knew.

She drank a coffee from a paper cup. Outside the landscape became softer, the hills different.

The address was from the institute's website. She had the route on her phone.

It was just after midday when she stood in front of the building. Nineteen-sixties, functional, with an entrance that issued no invitation and was not unwelcoming either. She stood on the pavement outside it longer than necessary. He had mentioned the building once, in Cologne, incidentally — the institute, the walk from the station, office hours on Fridays. She had registered this the way one registers details one hasn't yet placed. Now she stood in front of it, and the imagined and the real didn't quite coincide — the building was more functional than she had expected, less like a place that housed someone she knew. She knew travel agencies. She knew the kind of buildings you walked into and got something done. This was different, and she felt it, physically, as a kind of threshold, before she went in.

In the secretariat that opened onto the lobby, a woman looked up at her with a friendly expression.

I'm looking for Professor Baumgärtner, said Nadine. *Christoph Baumgärtner.*

Do you have an appointment?

No. We know each other. I'm passing through.

The woman looked at her screen, typed something. *He still has office hours. I can ask.*

She waited in the lobby on a plastic chair beside a plant that nobody had consciously noticed for years. She held her phone in her hand without looking at it. This was the waiting that had no impatience — she had arrived and was now waiting for the place to acknowledge that.

Seven minutes. Then eight.

Then muffled footsteps in the corridor, and through the glass door she saw him coming, and he saw her, and his face did something she didn't want to read in that moment, because the reading would have been too much at once.

It was not alarm. It was not welcome. It was something open that she couldn't close — a brief moment in which the reaction had not yet found its shape, and then it had one.

He came out.

Nadine.

Hello, she said. She stood up. *I was nearby. Nuremberg, a travel technology trade fair.* She heard herself that it wasn't quite right, not as a lie but as a construction that had been finished a moment too late.

He looked at her. *I've still got half an hour of office hours.* He named a café, explained where it was. *I'll come as soon as I can.*

Fine, she said.

He nodded, once, briefly, and went back through the glass door.

She waited in the café for ninety minutes. It was an ordinary café, smelling of coffee and warm wood, and she ordered a milky coffee and then another, and looked out of the window at the street, which had nothing particular about it.

The circling went on, but quieter now, because the waiting had a concrete aim: he would come. That would have been enough for another ninety minutes.

She thought about the confrontation in November, about the *maybe it is* and the *I don't know whether what I think is what you want to hear.* She thought about the calls he hadn't answered. She thought, without thinking it fully: *wat does that mean, like.* And then she let the thought go, because the café was warm and the second milky coffee was as good as the first.

He came at quarter past three, sat down across from her, laid his jacket over the chair. He looked tired, not ill, the kind of tiredness that comes from inside.

How was the fair? he asked.

Informative, she said.

He ordered an espresso. They talked, and the conversation was not bad — that was the strange thing, it was genuinely not bad. They talked about Bachmann, about a passage she had come across again the week before, and he listened, and what he said was right. She leaned forward slightly as she spoke, her upper body tilted in, because she wanted it to land, because she was showing herself, now, in this café in Erlangen, with the hard-won standard language and the intensifiers that came when she was sure of herself. That was the Nadine he had known — or the one he should have known. She showed this, and felt, briefly and physically, that the showing wasn't landing the way it used to. Not because she was doing it wrong. Because he was listening differently. She sent the signal anyway.

He didn't lean forward. He sat upright, calm, the espresso in front of him.

It's really extraordinary, she said about a passage in Bachmann, *the way she describes language as betrayal and at the same time has no other option but language. That's the absolute dilemma.*

That's the centre, aye, he said — the *aye* came as it always came, without his steering it, and the falling movement of his voice was there, the same finality she knew. But the falling was quick, closed, without the small pause she knew. She waited for the next sentence. There too: falling quickly, finished. What that meant, she didn't think to the end. The sound was still his, and she held onto that. *That's his voice. That's the man I know.*

I'm glad to see you, she said, at some point — and the melody rose, the voice searched, because this was too important to stay controlled.

So am I, he said, and the words fell as his words always fell.

That *so am I* was right. It was grammatically right, it was not cold, it was not wrong. And yet it sat a millimetre off, at a place she could feel and not name. For a moment there was a question announcing itself — *does he see what I'm showing him? Or does he see something else?* — and then she pushed the question away, because the knowledge that lay behind it would undo everything. The ground beneath her held. She allowed it to hold.

Just after five they stood in front of the café. The farewell was brief — an embrace, his hand briefly at her back. Then he went.

She watched him go. Just before the corner he turned once and nodded. Once, no smile, only the nod, and then he was round the corner and gone.

She stood a moment longer, pulled her jacket tighter, and walked towards the station.

On the train back she sat at the window. The dusk had flattened the Franconian landscape, washed out the colours, dissolved the fields and villages into something indistinct.

She thought about the look through the glass door — the openness that had no shape, the moment in which his reaction hadn't yet been decided. She thought about the *so am I,* the quick falling movement afterwards. About the nod, just before the corner, that was not a statement and yet was.

The circling had new material: the glass door, the café, the embrace, the nod. It circled as it always circled — *what did I do wrong* — and the new material made it denser, not different. The question stayed the same. The answer didn't come, like.

And then, quieter, as the sky went fully dark: *Che meraviglia,* she thought — but the word had lost its lustre. It sounded like something one says when one doesn't know what else to say.

The train moved through the dark.

The flat was quiet when she arrived. Markus's jacket was not on the coat rack — he was still in the studio. She set down her rucksack, took off her shoes, stood a moment in the hallway.

The flat was the same as always. The fridge hummed. On the kitchen table were Markus's papers, a half-empty glass of water, a pen without a cap. She picked up the glass, rinsed it, put it on the draining board.

Then she sat down at the kitchen table and waited, without knowing what for.

17

The lecture in Göttingen was well prepared, better than most, because he had been carrying the subject for two years and because he had revised the structure a third time in the past few weeks, so that every section now carried what it needed to carry, without promising more.

He travelled up Thursday evening, spent the night in a hotel in the town centre, a good hotel he had chosen himself. The room was quiet, the desk chair comfortable enough. He opened the laptop, loaded the presentation, went through it.

The second slide had a sentence that wasn't quite right — not wrong, but imprecise, a formulation that promised more than the argument behind it held. He saw this now, after the

third read-through, and he rewrote the sentence, twice, the second time it sat. More precise, without loss.

He closed the laptop, lay down, slept.

The next morning he ate breakfast in the hotel, alone, the conference programme on the table unread. The coffee was good. Outside was March, grey and moderate, with a sky that had no plans.

He took a taxi to the venue, a university building in the town centre, and was met by a doctoral student who led him to the lecture hall. The hall was medium-sized, well filled, the audience attentive. He recognised two faces, old acquaintances from his doctoral years, with whom he would eat afterwards and talk, about the book, about the debate currently running in a journal.

He gave the lecture. It went well, the second slide sat now. Questions afterwards, good questions, one genuinely good, from a postdoc from Hamburg who drew a connection he hadn't drawn himself. He noted the name.

That was the morning.

In the evening he ate with the two old acquaintances in a restaurant near the market. They talked about the book, about a colleague who had taken a position none of the three shared but that couldn't simply be dismissed, because the argument beneath it was not bad. And then about the debate currently running — social reproduction, the mechanisms through which children are born into their parents' world before anyone has had the chance to want something different. He spoke about it precisely and well, as he always did, that was his terrain. The food was good. The evening was pleasant and without edges.

He got back to the hotel at half past ten. The room was quiet. He put his phone on the desk, opened the laptop, went through the emails, replied to two, left a third for tomorrow.

Then he glanced at his phone. Nadine's number had been there, just after nine, when he had briefly checked at dinner. He had put it away and returned to the conversation.

He picked up the phone now and waited a moment — as though the ringing were still there, as though it had a duration that extended beyond its stopping. He thought about the voice, briefly, in the way one thinks about something one knows: the melody was still there, the rise, the texture — but as bare information, not as body. Only the outline of something that had once been physical and was no longer. He had expected more to be there. There was less than

expected. He noticed this, and noticed that he didn't know whether that was a loss or a relief, and then that thought too was almost gone.

He laid the phone face down on the bedside table.

That was a movement that was not a decision, because the decision had already been made, at some point, without a particular moment one could have pointed to and said: *there it was.* That's just how it is — that was not a sentence he thought aloud, it was a reflex, an afterglow that settled and then was gone.

He brushed his teeth, undressed, lay down.

Sleep came quickly.

Claudia was already in bed when he came home the next evening. He had taken the nine o'clock train, arrived in Erlangen just before midnight. In the hallway Claudia had left the light on. He set down his bag.

Then he undressed quietly, lay down beside her. Without a word she pressed briefly against him, then turned her back to him and fell back to sleep immediately. The room smelled of what it always smelled of, of Claudia, of the house, of the life here that had no other shape and that he never missed because it was simply there.

He lay on his back, eyes open, and looked at the ceiling, on which the street light made a narrow, even pattern.

He thought about the second slide, which sat now. He thought about the postdoc from Hamburg's question, which he hadn't fully answered, and about the fact that the answer could become interesting if he followed it. He thought about the dinner, about the colleague's argument that couldn't simply be dismissed.

The place where something else might have been was empty — not as a loss, not as an absence that had a shape. Simply no thought that came. Not about Göttingen, not about the samovar, not about the voice he had heard from the fourth row. Not about Cologne, not about the four nights, not about the pharmacy bag on the bedside table, not about the questions she had asked when the cough had taken her talking from her and she had given him the conversation for the first time. None of that was there. The place where it would have been was empty, without shape, without weight.

After a while his eyelids grew heavier. Claudia breathed evenly beside him.

He closed his eyes.

Epilogue

The enquiry came at quarter past ten, by email, from a Mr Wollenberg in Witten who wanted to take his wife to Sicily in April, two weeks, not too expensive but not cheap either, he'd heard that Taormina was beautiful, was that right.

The Taormina part was right, with qualifications. Nadine opened the system, entered the details, looked at what was available. April was low season, which had its advantages and disadvantages, she wrote that plainly, with the two or three specific points that showed you had read what was being asked. Three hotels, various categories, a brief note on each. She sent the reply. She knew enquiries like this, she knew men like this — Witten, Sicily, two weeks, not too expensive but not cheap either. That was her Tuesday.

Outside was March, still undecided. The colleague beside her was on the phone. The printer made the noise it always made.

It was nothing particular that triggered the thought. Perhaps the word Sicily. Perhaps the light, which at this time of year still came in at a low angle and made the office look warmer than it was. She thought about Christoph for a moment, briefly, without drama — the way one thinks about something that was very close for a while and is no longer. Not as the man who had confirmed her intellectual world. Simply as someone who had been there. The mirror was gone, and without the mirror the performance was gone too — not as a result of a decision or an insight, only as an exhaustion that made the no-longer-being-able-to look like silence.

Her phone lay on the desk. She didn't pick it up.

E 'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

The line came as it had always come — without invitation, without occasion, as though it were a weather event, not a thought. Still, closed, like a fact. No rise at the end, no searching. It no longer had the same temperature as before, and it came anyway, on the way things stay when one has stopped needing them. She held the line in herself for a moment. Then she opened the next enquiry.

Insomma.

Hedigel

1

Poppet.

The word came without her having summoned it. Her thumb still rested on the child's forehead, the sign was made, and yet her hand lingered a heartbeat too long, because the forehead was warm beneath the thumb and because the child had closed its eyes, so still, so completely still, as though the sign of the cross were the only thing it needed just then.

Then the small fingers reached for hers. Not tightly. Only like a question.

Hedwig freed the child's fingers from her hand, calmly, without impatience. 'Sit down,' she said.

It had frozen overnight. Hedwig noticed when she opened the door to the flat: the cold that met her, and on the wooden landing outside a thin crust of ice that gleamed dully in the grey of the early morning. She thought: March, and still this.

She stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind her. The ice on the landing broke under her first step with a fine, dry crack. Hedwig gripped the railing and made her way down the steps, the empty pail in her free hand, slowly – not because she was afraid of falling, but because she could not afford to fall. Each step the same: the crack, the brief give beneath the clog. Below, on the cobblestones of the yard, the air stood still.

The pump was only a few steps away, beside the door to the kitchen. Hedwig set the pail in the stone basin beneath the spout, gripped the handle, pressed it down. The first time it resisted – the seal was cold – on the second the water came, dark and icy, and began to fill the pail. Her hands were numb after the third stroke. At last she released the handle, lifted the full pail from the basin and set it on the ground.

From the cowshed on the north side of the yard came sounds: a muffled snorting, the scraping of hooves on cobblestone, then silence, then a deep snuffling again. The large doors were shut. Through the small door that Karl Temme had pulled to behind him, a narrow strip of light fell. The warmth of the animals had gathered behind it, and if one came close enough, one could

smell them: the damp, heavy scent of hide and breath that felt almost like warmth in the March cold.

Hedwig went to the small door and opened it. Karl Temme was at the fourth or fifth animal, the pail between his knees, his hands moving steadily. He did not look up, but he had noticed her and nodded to the right, where the milk can stood against the wall. Hedwig took it. The can was warm in her numb hands.

'Milking well today,' said Karl Temme, without stopping. 'This one here gives well.' He tipped his chin toward the cow on the left.

'Thank you,' said Hedwig. She pulled the small door shut behind her and went back across the cobblestones to the pump. There she took the milk can in her other hand and lifted the pail with the now free right. Then up the steps, slowly, with the weight of the water. Above, the landing, the door, the room.

The stove was hers. That was true, and it was precisely true: it stood in the front room of the small flat that had been assigned to them, and no one else used it. No one else decided when it burned. She had the right to light it when she chose, without asking – not because it was her property and she could have carried it away, but because it stood in her space and because no one else touched it. That mattered to her. It still mattered, even though the room was so cramped that when one turned around one knocked against the table, and the ceiling on the side towards the window hung lower than on the other, because the sloping roof did what sloping roofs do. For the three youngest and herself it was enough, just. Herbert, the second eldest, lived elsewhere in Steinbeck, with a woman who had a room. That he could not live on the Brinkmann farm had more than one reason.

She set down the pail, opened the stove door and made a fire. The wood in the box beside it was dry – Karl Temme had brought it the previous evening, one had to give him that – and the flame caught at the first attempt. She closed the stove lid, ladled water from the pail into the large pot and set it on one ring. The milk she poured into the small pot and set on the other, and waited.

Behind the plank wall to the back room it was quiet. Klaus was still asleep. The twins were still asleep. From the other side, through the wall, came the muffled sound of Anna Brinkmann's footsteps in the bedroom, a creak, then silence again. From below came a low from the calf pen, brief, without echo. The floor between was thin; before the conversion it had had only to bear hay.

Hedwig waited until the water was warm. Then she poured some into the washbowl on the table. She brought the milk to a boil: a full three minutes, counting them silently, stirred in the oats, let the porridge swell. The room smelled now of warm grain and of the smoke from the

fresh fire that had entered before the draught had taken hold. That was the morning smell. It was provisional, as everything here was provisional, but it was real.

Provisional: that was the word she needed, and she used it daily, inwardly, almost like a prayer. *This is provisional.* One did not have to overlook what one saw; one only had to know that it would not last. Whoever knew that could carry on. Whoever forgot it was lost.

She opened the door to the back room.

'Up,' she said.

They came one after another: Klaus first, because Klaus always rose first, half-asleep and immediately loud, his clogs still in his hand. Then Uwe, quiet, who sat and waited, as Uwe always waited. Petra last. Before that, still half in sleep, she had felt along the edge of the bed, then across the floor beside it. She found the doll, drew it to her, and laid it on the pillow. She stood up. Her hair – grown back now, even, with a straight fringe that Hedwig had cut for her.

Hedwig placed each child in turn before the washbowl. The cloth was warm; she washed face and hands, wrung it out, moved on. That was the order: Klaus, Uwe, Petra. There was no cold water, not for these children, not now, not after all that had been. A chill began with cold on the skin, she knew that, she had learned it in her own body, and since then she had known it with a certainty that no doctor could have talked her out of. When Petra was done, Hedwig tipped the water into the slop pail that stood beside the stove, rinsed the washbowl with a little fresh water and set it back in its place.

Then the sign of the cross. For each child, in turn. On the shelf stood the small picture of the Black Madonna, before it the egg cup – white porcelain, a little chipped at the rim. In Gleiwitz a small ceramic font had hung beside the bedroom door, a wedding gift from Vika; it had not come with them. She dipped her thumb in the holy water and traced the cross on the forehead: first the length, then the crosswise. Klaus moved half a step closer so the thumb would land true. Uwe held still with his thoughts elsewhere. Petra closed her eyes.

The word Hedwig had thought but not spoken.

She freed the child's fingers. 'Sit down,' she said.

All three sat at the table. Hedwig ladled the porridge into the bowls: three portions, equal in size, equal in heat. She remained standing, folded her hands, and the children folded their hands.

'Come, Lord Jesus,' said Hedwig. 'Come, Lord Jesus,' said the children. 'Be our Guest.' 'Be our Guest.' 'And let these gifts to us be blessed.' 'And let these gifts to us be blessed.'

The children began to eat.

Klaus had the bowl half empty after the third spoonful. Uwe ate quietly and steadily, without looking up. Petra spooned slowly, and at the edge of her bowl a pale fold had gathered: the skin that had formed when the milk was brought to the boil, which Hedwig had not been able to skim off entirely.

Petra pushed it further to the rim with her spoon.

'You eat what is put before you,' said Hedwig, without looking up.

Petra ate.

After breakfast Uwe and Petra fetched their cloth bags. Klaus took the old pack from the hook, the small knapsack that had stayed with him from another time. They went.

The room was warm now, the stove drew well, the fire had settled. Below, the calves had woken: a scraping, a shoving, the sound of animals pressing against each other. Then, from next door, Heinrich Brinkmann's voice, indistinct, a deep clearing of the throat that the wall did not quite muffle.

The window of the front room faced west, onto the yard. It was low, because the eaves hung low, and anyone who wished to look through had to bend down. Hedwig bent down.

Outside, at the green island toward the road: the cross. The stone Christ, pale against the dark plinth, arms outstretched in the morning light. The birch behind it was still bare, its branches thin and dark against the grey of the sky.

How long the cross might have stood there. Since the grandfather of Anna Brinkmann, perhaps longer still. It had stood there, and everything else had been built around it: the farm, the stable, the fruit trees behind the house, the road that curved past in front. The cross was older than anything Hedwig could see, and it would stand when all of this had long since become something else.

Nothing she had ever owned had stood like that.

The front room was quiet now. The stove still drew, the fire crackled softly; in an hour it would have gone out. From below the calves, quieter now than in the early morning, an occasional scraping.

Hedwig straightened up. She went to the stove and put on fresh water. Then she took a bowl for herself, filled it and sat down at the table.

2

When she had eaten and the water was warm, she poured it into the washbowl and washed herself: face, neck, underarms, as thoroughly as the room allowed. Then she changed her blouse. The water in the bowl was still warm enough afterwards for the dishes: the bowls, the spoons, the milk pot. She wrung out the cloth, dried everything off, wiped the table.

Then she took the tin from the shelf.

The tin held what remained of the papers: the marriage certificate, the birth and baptism certificates of the children, the title deeds to the house in Petersberg, which interested only her now, no one else. And the letters – not many, and the first had been a long time coming, too long – folded, each one twice, on top the latest, which had come from California again. Beneath it the photograph, removed from the album, wrapped in a linen cloth so it would not crease: the family photograph from the garden in Gleiwitz.

The Cross of Honour was not among them. It lay at home in the garden, under the asparagus bed, with the good porcelain.

She took the last letter and sat down at the table.

Ernst wrote without complaint and as he always wrote. He wrote that he was well, all things considered. He wrote that the food was acceptable, not good, but acceptable, as one knew. He wrote that he was learning English – one hour every day, the Americans held lessons for everyone, a young officer from Ohio explained the pronunciation, it was not so difficult if one paid attention. *I can now say* how are you *quite well, it sounds almost like a proper American.*

Hedwig read this sentence and thought: good that he is learning something. Then she read on.

He wrote of the orange groves in the south of California, of the long irrigation channels that carried the water through the rows like small canals, each tree receiving its allotted measure. He wrote of a machine he had seen: a construction of metal and belts that shook the oranges from the tree and caught them in baskets, without a person having to climb up. *You would not believe how they do it. A man sits up in a cab and pulls a lever, and the fruit falls as if of its own accord.* He wrote that he hoped to come home soon. No date.

That was all. One page, closely written, the letters large and even, the handwriting he had always had, that had always been admired in him, such a fine hand, to be sure.

Hedwig laid the letter on the table and looked at it.

She did not think: I miss him. That was not a thought that came to her, at least not in that way, not in those words. What she thought was more concrete and heavier: when will he come, and

what comes then. The conversation from the autumn of 1939 had not been forgotten. It had ended without having reached a conclusion, and that ending had been a kind of promise that neither of them had put into words: that the conversation would continue, once they were sitting at the same table again.

She did not know what she would say to him. She knew that she had to say something.

The house was gone. She had not given way, and the house was gone nonetheless, and that was a sentence she thought as far as this point and no further. As far as this point: she had not given way. This far she could think, and no further.

In an earlier letter Ernst had written: *Now I am in California, where Emil is.* She had read that sentence at the time and then put the letter in the tin with the others.

Emil in California. Ernst in California. She did not care for it.

She folded the letter.

What the letter did not contain: a date. *Soon* was in it, as it always was, but soon was no answer to the question that lay beneath. Where to – that was the thought she did not think to the end. The house was gone. Steinbeck was provisional. She had been unable to give him a fixed address, one that would hold longer than the next letter from the housing office.

The sentences about the irrigation channels, about the machine with the lever – she read them as one reads a weather report: he is alive, he keeps himself occupied, he is coming back. There was nothing more to take from it. What else those sentences held – he wrote about the machine in more sentences than about his return – she did not see, or did not see it because it was not a picture she could afford. She herself did not know the difference.

Hedwig took the photograph from the linen cloth.

The family photograph from the garden in Gleiwitz, early summer 1939: the coffee table, the tablecloth with its border. Werner, twelve years old. Beside him Herbert, ten, hand on hip, even in the photograph. Klaus, not yet five, beside the Pflichtjahr girl Erna, half leaning against her, which he was not really supposed to do and always did anyway. Hedwig with Uwe on her arm. Ernst with Petra, both slightly blurred because he was making faces with her. Five children, all in one photograph – never again after that. In the background the house. The trellis that Ernst had put up. The window on the raised ground floor, behind it the bathroom, which one could not see.

It had always been so: in photographs one did not see the bathroom. One saw the house from outside, the façade, the roof. What was inside, what she had built up, what proved who they were – that one did not see. One carried it within.

She held the photograph for a while.

Then she laid it on the table and folded her hands, briefly, without closing her eyes, without the usual words: *Dear God, let him come back.* That was all. No Our Father, no Hail Mary. Only this one sentence, shorter than any prayer she knew, and more fervent than most.

She laid the photograph back in the linen cloth, the letter on top, put everything in the tin and pushed it onto the shelf.

3

That afternoon he was chopping wood.

Hedwig saw it through the window: Karl Temme on the cobblestones, the block before him, the axe in both hands. He raised it and let it fall, without haste, without effort beyond what was necessary. The wood split apart. He set the halves aside, placed the next block, raised the axe. That was all. There was nothing remarkable about it, and he made nothing remarkable of it.

She had bent down to look through the window and stayed bent down, longer than necessary. Not because wood-chopping was a spectacle. But because the yard was peaceful and because the steady sound of the axe – the dull impact, then the splitting, then the pause – had something to it that one could listen to without thinking.

Twenty-one years old, Heinrich Brinkmann had told her when Karl arrived in the autumn. From Hopsten. Hedwig had nodded. She had not asked more, and Heinrich had not said more.

Since then Karl Temme had been here as a farmhand. That described it precisely and completely. He rose at half past four, milked the cows, fed the calves, chopped wood. He ate in the Brinkmanns' kitchen, at the smaller table by the window, not at the family table. He slept in his room in the farm buildings, between the barn and the pigsty, on a camp bed. That was the order of the farm, and Karl Temme fitted himself into this order so entirely that one forgot to ask whether he knew any other.

What he did for Hedwig had come about without anyone having discussed it. Every evening, after the evening milking, when she was already at evening prayers with the children, she heard his steps on the outside stairs: slow, deliberate, the weight of the wood in his hands. The door she left unbolted. The placing of the wood in the box beside the stove, piece by piece, so it would not clatter. Then the steps again, down the stairs, gone.

It had never been agreed upon. It was so now.

Hedwig had not wondered at it; someone had to bring the wood, and that someone was Karl. What she did not think: that he did it because one morning he had seen her climbing the stairs,

the heavy water pail in one hand, wood in the other, and because that had seemed to him too much for a woman alone with three small children. He had not told her that, and she had not asked.

At Christmas she had placed a piece of cake on a plate, covered it with a cloth and set it at the bottom of the stable door, without comment. The next morning the plate stood on the lower landing, empty, wiped clean. That was the only thing that had ever passed between them that was something like a personal gesture. And the doll, of course, that he had made and given to Petra at Christmas – but that was something else, Hedwig counted that separately.

The rung on the outside stairs that had come loose in December – Karl had repaired it, without saying anything. The door handle at the entrance that had not caught properly – he had replaced it. Hedwig had noticed, because she noticed when things were right or not right. She had thought: good. Nothing more.

Petra had moved soundlessly to stand beside her, the doll under her arm. She stood so close that Hedwig felt her without looking at her.

Outside Karl raised the axe, let it fall. The wood split.

'See how he does that,' said Hedwig. She glanced briefly down at Petra. 'And see how he is looking at you. You were badly behaved this morning. It shows.'

Petra looked. Karl leaned back briefly, hands on his hips, and looked at the finished pile. Then, almost in passing, his glance went sideways: to the window. To Hedwig and Petra.

Petra lowered her gaze.

Hedwig said nothing more. She straightened up; her back had had enough of bending.

Through the window she saw that he was done with the woodpile. He leaned the axe against the wall of the farm buildings, gathered the logs into a basket and carried them to the shelter at the gable end. That was the supply for the next few days. He stacked the wood neatly, the logs laid crosswise for the air to circulate, cross-braced at both ends. He did not do it for Hedwig, nor for the farmers. He did it because it was done that way.

Hedwig straightened her back. Through the wall she heard footsteps from the Brinkmanns' bedroom, then a voice: the farmer's wife. And then, quieter, another voice, older, calmer, that answered. Dina Brinkmann, the farmer's wife's mother, who occupied the room next door. Hedwig saw her daily in the kitchen, peeling potatoes or knitting, sometimes, when it was warm enough, out under the fruit trees as well, her knitting in her lap. The old farmer's wife was nearly blind; she held the vegetables close to her face when she peeled, and when someone entered the room she did not look up but paused and listened.

But she and Hedwig scarcely spoke to one another. When Dina Brinkmann spoke – truly spoke, not the short standard sentences she kept ready for Hedwig – it sounded like a German that Hedwig could not quite piece together: the words drew out, the vowels did not match, and what she understood was not enough to answer. A boundary both silently respected.

With Karl Temme it was different. When the old farmer's wife heard his steps she would call something out to him, and Karl answered in the same moment, without hesitating, and then the two of them would laugh, about whatever it was. Hedwig mostly did not understand it. But the laughter one always understood.

Once, on a Sunday, she had seen Karl crossing the yard in his good shirt, in the morning, before breakfast. 'Recke,' Heinrich Brinkmann had said when she asked. 'Church. He's Protestant.'

Hedwig had nodded. She had thought briefly: Protestant, like Ernst. And then she had thought of what Ernst had said to her, back in Heinrichau, when he had explained that he was not Catholic and that he knew that was a difficulty, but that he would not make a difficulty of it, that Hedwig could raise the children who would come in her faith, that he would, if she wished, join in the prayers and attend Mass with her.

He had gone with her, on Sundays, always. He had folded his hands and moved his lips and knelt when one knelt. *Hedigel*, he had called her then in Heinrichau, for the first time, on an evening she still remembered. She had kept the name.

Karl Temme went to Recke alone. That was something different. Not worse, not better. But something different.

That evening she heard his steps on the stairs, as every evening. The placing of the logs, piece by piece. The door that closed. The steps going down the stairs and across the cobblestones of the yard, until they could no longer be heard.

The children were asleep. The stove drew. The box beside the stove was full.

4

The Brinkmanns' kitchen was larger than her own two rooms together. That was always the first thought Hedwig had when she opened the door from the yard and entered: how much room there was. The stove, wide, with four rings. The table in the centre, at which eight people could have sat. The shelves along the wall, the bowls arranged by size, the pots on hooks, everything in its place. An oilcloth cover on the sofa by the window, wiped clean, practical, unpretentious.

Hedwig had learned every task in this room over the past months: where the whiting was kept, which pan for which purpose, how the stove drew. She worked correctly and without hesitation, because that was the arrangement and because Hedwig kept arrangements.

When Hedwig entered, Anna Brinkmann was standing at the table peeling carrots. She was in her fifth month, visible now beneath the apron, a fullness that did not yet hinder her movement but was there. Hedwig had noticed three weeks ago, one morning when the farmer's wife had bent down to take something from the lower shelf and straightened up again. The apron caught where it did not usually catch. The farmer's wife reached for it and straightened it, without thinking. Hedwig had seen that and known what it meant. She had said nothing, and the farmer's wife had said nothing.

Petra came in behind Hedwig and climbed onto the sofa, sat at the edge, knees drawn up. Since Monday she had had a cold, and Hedwig had kept her at home, although the cold had improved. Better was not well. Petra had the doll with her. She stood it upright against the back of the sofa, straightened its little dress, looked at it. Then she said something, inaudibly, directly to its face. The doll looked back, with its round sooty eyes that had no depth.

'Mother is not here today,' said the farmer's wife, without looking up. 'Heinrich has taken her to the doctor.' She set down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron. 'The potatoes, if you'd peel them and fry them after.'

Hedwig peeled potatoes. It was a full bowlful, and she peeled as she always did: the knife close to the skin, no waste, even strips. The peeled potatoes she laid on the board and cut into pieces, as she had always done – small enough to cook through quickly.

The farmer's wife came to the counter to set down the carrots and looked for a moment at the board. In doing so she stretched her arm out to reach past Hedwig for the salt pot that stood behind her.

Hedwig stepped back, for a second, barely perceptibly, the body faster than the thought. Then she stood again where she had stood.

The farmer's wife had not noticed. She took the salt pot and looked at the board.

'Leave them whole,' she said, in passing. 'That's how we do them here.'

'Yes,' said Hedwig.

She left the remaining potatoes whole. That was possible. One could do it this way or that way, it was a question of method, not a question of ability. Hedwig knew the difference between the two. The farmer's wife did not need to.

The priest in Tarnowitz, Father Gorecki, had once spoken about humility in the Mass. Hedwig had been fourteen, and she had listened as she always listened: fully, because one listened fully when the priest spoke. He had said that humility was not weakness. Humility was the knowledge of who one was before God, and this knowledge protected one against confusing rank with worth.

She had not forgotten it. It was one of the things she carried with her, not as a conscious thought but as a bearing: that the rank others assigned one said nothing about worth. Humility was the knowledge of one's own worth despite the rank assigned. That had helped her, in Tarnowitz, in Heinrichau, in the cramped service flat. It helped her here.

But this was not even that. These were potatoes, and potatoes she knew.

Anna Brinkmann had a school certificate. Heinrich had mentioned it once in passing, and Hedwig had taken note and left it at that. A school certificate. Few women in Tarnowitz had had a school certificate. In Heinrichau the Grand Duchess had had none, because Grand Duchesses went other ways, and yet – or for that reason – she had changed a room when she entered it, without one being able to say how.

The farmer's wife's hand knew the way to the salt without her eyes having to follow, and this ease was genuine, Hedwig saw that, she did not doubt it. But it was not the same. It was something different from what had been present in the rooms in Heinrichau, in the way the Grand Duchess had set down a teacup, in the tone in which she had said something one did not forget, even when one could no longer remember the words.

What exactly was different she could not have named. It was simply different.

Petra had meanwhile laid the doll on the sofa cushion and was kneeling over it, hands on her knees. She leaned forward slightly, the distance between her and the doll smaller than necessary, speaking to it quietly and earnestly. Then she took the doll, held it for a moment at eye level and looked at it without smiling. The sooty eyes looked back.

Petra stood it up again.

'The cooking water,' said the farmer's wife later, without looking up, 'goes in the pail.'

Hedwig already had the pot in her hand, on her way to the drain. At home the water had always been thrown away.

'Yes,' said Hedwig.

She pushed the pail under the pot and tipped it. What it was kept for here – whether it went into the dough or to the animals – the farmer's wife did not say, and Hedwig did not ask.

The hand obeyed. The rest took a moment longer.

Petra, on the sofa, looked up. Hedwig felt the gaze without turning round. The child sat and looked as it always looked, with that attentiveness that understood nothing and saw everything. Hedwig held the knife in her hand and cut the cooked potatoes into slices, evenly, without haste, her shoulders straight.

She thought: in a moment I will go back up to my room. In a moment.

The Grand Duchess – Feodora, the wife of the Grand Duke of Saxony, with the dark-blonde hair and the long hands – had never explained in Heinrichau how something was to be done. She had shown it, once, without words, and afterwards one had known. Not because the Grand Duchess had exerted strictness, but because the way she showed it made one want to do it properly.

That was the difference.

Hedwig cut on and began to fry the potatoes. The large pan with the onions was hot, Hedwig stirred; the onions and potatoes smelled fragrant. That was a good smell. The Brinkmanns' kitchen smelled proper, one had to say that. The stove was a good stove, larger than hers, with a better draught. The farmer's wife kept her kitchen in order. Hedwig acknowledged that, because she acknowledged order where she saw it.

The farmer's wife was now at the table kneading dough. Her hands moved through the mass in steady motions, press, fold, press. She kneaded well, that was plain: the movement came from the shoulders, not from the wrists.

Hedwig had learned to bake in Tarnowitz, nine siblings and the father dead. One learned there everything one needed, because there was no choice. And then Heinrichau, where one had learned that what one could do had its place in another world too, if one applied it properly.

'Done,' said Hedwig.

She had put the fried potatoes into a bowl and covered it with a plate, then cleaned the pan, the wooden spoon and the knife. The farmer's wife looked up, glanced at the bowl, nodded. 'Thank you.'

Hedwig put the pan back in its place on the shelf. She took Petra by the hand and drew her off the sofa. The child took the doll, glanced briefly towards the counter where the farmer's wife continued to knead.

'Oh, that's right,' said the farmer's wife, without looking up. 'The carrot peelings.' She tipped her chin towards the bowl that stood beside the stove. 'Since you're going out – to the rabbit hutch.'

Hedwig took the bowl.

The rabbit hutch had its place in the calf pen beneath Hedwig's rooms. One could hear the calves from the door already: the scraping of hooves on straw, an occasional dull pressing, animal against animal. Hedwig went in, Petra behind her.

What she saw needed no words to explain it. A rabbit was moving between the calves' legs, its ears flat, its body low. The hutch stood open. Klaus was crouching on the straw trying to catch the animal. Uwe stood against the stable wall and watched.

The rabbit had been in Klaus's arms just a moment before. That was plain from the way he held out his hands: palms upward, fingers slightly curved. Klaus had had of all the children the greatest need to hold something. That had always been so.

The rabbit ran into a corner. Klaus had stood up and was moving slowly now, quietly, and then he had it, both hands under its belly.

Klaus set the rabbit back in its hutch and took a step back.

In silence and with a set face Hedwig tipped the carrot peelings into the hutch and closed the latch. Then she turned to Klaus, who had remained standing motionless, and cuffed him once – without hesitation, without anger, cheek, flat hand, because what she would have used for this in Gleiwitz she had had to leave behind there.

'We cannot afford to be in the Brinkmanns' debt,' she said.

That was the sentence.

Klaus did not raise his hand to his cheek. He knew the reason for the blow. Not because he had been bad. He had forgotten what their situation was.

Petra stood by. Hedwig paid her no attention.

On the way back, climbing the outside stairs, Hedwig thought briefly of something Frau Dr. Vieweger had once said, in Gleiwitz, while clearing up after a Women's League evening: that a child must know why it was being punished. That was the difference between upbringing and what was not.

Klaus knew. That was in order.

On the landing stood a cardboard box.

5

A brown cardboard box, large, with many foreign stamps and an address in a handwriting she did not know: *Mrs. Hedwig Pätzold, care of Brinkmann, Steinbeck, Kreis Tecklenburg, Germany.* In the upper left corner, in the same handwriting as the address: *Emil Pätzold, 1847 Mission St., San Francisco, CA.*

Hedwig read the name, lifted the box, it was heavy. She carried it into the flat and set it on the table. The room was cramped, the table too close to the stove, and when one turned around one knocked against the plank wall to the back room. That was so, and that would remain so, provisionally. But it was her room.

The children pressed around the table. Klaus reached his hand towards the box. Hedwig said nothing, but he drew it back. Petra stood beside it and looked at the box, arms pressed to her sides. Hedwig fetched the kitchen knife and cut through the string that held the box together and opened the flaps.

On top lay two bars of chocolate. Flat, in brown paper, with the print *Hershey's.* Hedwig set them aside and reached deeper into the box.

A cylindrical tin, larger than a tin of preserves. The lid was slightly concave. Hedwig turned it in her hands. She had never seen such a tin. The metal was cold and smooth, Hedwig read the words *Folgers Coffee.* They were not printed on a paper label but lithographed directly onto the metal. The tin looked as though it had been made yesterday. Hedwig set it aside, for later, for herself.

Then, wrapped in newspaper, eight more tins, all the same: *Skippy Peanut Butter.* Hedwig took one in her hand. At the rim of the lid a small metal key was attached, like the key on a sardine tin, only larger. She knew that. She detached the key, pushed the tab through and rolled the strip back, once around the tin, until the lid could be lifted.

The smell came to meet her: nutty, heavy, faintly sweet. She dipped her finger in and tasted.

Strange. But good. Very good.

She looked at the tin without thinking, and then she thought after all: eight tins. That was a quantity.

Beneath it, folded up, something dark blue, large. She lifted it out and held it before her: a coat. Dark blue, heavy wool, with broad shoulders, the buttons of black plastic. The cloth was dense and firm, almost water-resistant; she had not known cloth of this quality for years. The collar smelled, if one came close enough, of a foreign washing, faint, barely perceptible. She laid the coat over the chair.

Right at the bottom, to the side: two pairs of children's shoes. Brown leather lace-ups, with a sole that gave softly when pressed. In the left shoe of the first pair, written in ink: *Billy.* Hedwig pushed the shoe towards Uwe: too large, still, the boy was too small for these shoes. But that would change.

No letter.

How Emil had come to have her address was a mystery to her. Ernst must have given it to him, from captivity, somehow, by a route she did not know. Ernst had therefore thought of Emil. Had written to him, or had written to someone else who knew Emil. Had passed on the address, the address of a farm in Steinbeck where his wife lived with three children in two rooms, and Herbert, the second eldest, somewhere in another household.

What had been between the brothers the package had not revealed.

Hedwig stood with the open peanut butter tin and thought about Emil. Not warmly, not coldly. Emil was the reckless one, the one who had never come back, who had gone on a ship and stayed in California because that was the sort he was, and now this man had sent peanut butter and a coat and children's shoes. That did not fit the picture she had of him. But that was presumably not his concern.

She set the tin back on the table.

'Come,' she said.

She broke the chocolate into pieces and laid a piece in front of each: Klaus, Uwe, Petra. Petra took the piece and held it in her hand before putting it in her mouth. She looked at it, the small fingers closed firmly round it, as though she first wanted to understand what it was.

'Eat,' said Hedwig.

Petra ate.

The three chewed, quietly, with a concentration that Hedwig saw without saying anything. Klaus had already reached for more before the first piece was quite gone. Uwe ate slowly and steadily, as Uwe did everything. Petra held the last corner a moment longer between her fingers, then that too was gone.

The seven still unopened peanut butter tins she set beside the coffee tin, neatly, their labels facing forward. The coat she hung on the hook beside the door. The children's shoes she set in the back room under one of the beds.

She folded the cardboard box flat. Then she stood for a moment at the table.

Eight tins. That was enough, if one managed it.

She began to manage it.

At supper Klaus ate three slices of white cheese bread, because Hedwig allowed it. When the plates were empty, she folded her hands, and the children folded their hands.

'We give Thee thanks, Lord Jesus Christ,' said Hedwig. 'We give Thee thanks, Lord Jesus Christ,' said the children. 'That Thou hast been our Guest.' 'That Thou hast been our Guest.'

And then Hedwig said: 'And thanks be to him who thought of us.'

The children waited to see if more was coming. Nothing more came.

Klaus asked: 'Who thought of us?'

'Someone,' said Hedwig.

She stood up and began to clear the plates.

6

The tin stood, covered with a saucer, on the shelf beside the coffee tin, and Hedwig looked at it every morning when she made the fire. *Butter* was on the label, she understood that, although it was English. Butter was spread on bread. That was clear.

On the second morning after she had received the package, the children sat at the table as every morning. Hedwig cut bread and spread the peanut butter on it with the knife, as one spread butter. The consistency was different from butter – thicker, heavier, it did not spread as easily – but it worked. She gave each child a slice.

Klaus ate immediately, without saying anything. Uwe ate as Uwe ate. Petra pushed the slice back and forth, finally took it in her hand, licked once at the edge when Hedwig was not looking, then ate.

That worked.

But butter was more than a spread. Butter was a cooking fat, every woman who could cook knew that. Hedwig put the pan on the stove, let it heat, and put a spoonful of peanut butter in.

What happened then happened quickly.

The paste did not melt like butter – it darkened immediately, discolouring from beige to brown to a deep reddish brown that was not a healthy colour, and began to smoke, with a smell that was neither of nut nor of fat nor of anything familiar, but of burnt sugar and something sharp that stung the eyes. The potato slices she had rashly put in immediately stuck to the bottom.

Hedwig pulled the pan from the heat. She scraped out the contents into the rubbish pail and washed the pan twice, with cold water and then with hot.

Klaus had stood in the doorway and watched. He said nothing. He was twelve and knew when silence was fitting.

Hedwig set the clean pan back on the stove. In silence she reached for the butter dish.

Her next attempt she made with the porridge.

She stirred a teaspoon of the paste into the finished porridge, shortly before serving. It did not dissolve completely, forming brown streaks in the whitish grey. She ladled the porridge into the bowls and waited.

Klaus ate without looking up. Uwe ate steadily, as always. Petra spooned once, twice, then again and again. Then she looked up.

'More,' said Petra.

That was the highest praise one could bestow in this room.

Hedwig stirred on and hummed as she did so, half under her breath, almost without noticing: *Holy God, we praise Thy name* – the first line, the melody she had known since childhood. Then she fell silent but stirred on, ready to fill more bowls.

From then on there was peanut butter porridge every other morning. Hedwig served it as though she had always done so.

After two weeks the first tin was nearly empty. One morning Hedwig stood in her room trying to scrape out the last of it with a spoon and spread it into a cup. The spoon could not reach into the ridges where the paste had settled. She took the tin and the cup and went down the stairs.

In the Brinkmanns' kitchen the old farmer's wife sat at the table, holding the vegetables close to her face, the knife moving steadily. She did not look up when Hedwig entered; she listened, her head slightly tilted.

'Frau Pätzold,' said the old farmer's wife.

'Good morning,' said Hedwig. 'I should like to borrow the pastry scraper for a moment, if it is free.'

She took it from the hook, worked it into the tin, along the sides, into the corners. The old farmer's wife peeled on without looking up, and then she raised her nose, barely perceptibly.

'What is that,' said the old farmer's wife. 'Smells of nuts.'

Hedwig needed a moment to put it together. 'An American butter,' she said. 'Made from nuts. My brother-in-law sent it. In America they put nut butter in the children's porridge in the morning. For the nourishment. That is how they do it there.'

The old farmer's wife stopped peeling. Not long, only a moment. 'Hark at that,' she said.

That was no mere expression. Hedwig stood with the tin in her hand. The old farmer's wife had laid down the knife and placed her hands flat on the table, her nose still faintly lifted.

Hedwig looked at the tin, then at the old woman. The pastry scraper was still in her hand. She could have spread a fingerful on the knife blade, just like that. She did not. She did not know why, or she knew and let it be.

'Yes,' said Hedwig. She wiped the pastry scraper with a cloth, hung it back in its place and left.

Hedwig rinsed out the first empty tin later and set it on the shelf. She put her sewing things in it, which until then had lain in a folded cloth out of which they always fell.

Seven tins remained. Hedwig rearranged them on the shelf carefully, their labels facing forward.

One of them she would not touch. One remained for Ernst, when he came back, so that she could say to him: your brother sent something. What he would say to that she did not know. Perhaps he would be pleased. She would not like that. Perhaps he would say: a good fellow, Emil. She would not like that either. Perhaps he would say nothing.

That would hurt least.

7

She had sent Klaus and Uwe to the back room and told them to stay there. Klaus had asked why. Hedwig had said: because I say so. Petra stood in the open door of the flat and looked down into the yard, and Hedwig left her standing there, because Petra was out in the air and because that had to be enough.

Hedwig stood on the landing above, at the railing, and saw Herbert come around the corner of the farm buildings into the yard. He walked slowly, setting each step so that his breath would not fall behind. He had recently turned eighteen. She had no candles, no cake, no gift. Here in Steinbeck it was the name day one celebrated, not the birthday, and that was perhaps the more fitting: a saint rather than a number, something one could carry.

At the foot of the stairs he stopped. Between them the seventeen steps, the distance that had not been agreed upon and that held nonetheless.

'Herbert,' she said.

'Mutti,' he said.

He coughs dryly, the doctor in Ibbenbüren had said, *that is normal for this stage, it does not mean things are getting worse, it means the lung is working.* Hedwig had listened and nodded and thought to herself that a doctor who used *normal* and *dry cough* in the same sentence was not her doctor, but he was the doctor to whom she could bring Herbert, and that was more than nothing.

'You look better than last week,' she said.

Herbert looked at her. 'Yes,' he said.

He did not look better than last week. He looked exactly as he had last week: thinner than he should be, with a pallor that was no longer a winter pallor but something more lasting, written in. But Hedwig was silent about it. The form held as long as one did not break it.

'Are you eating enough?'

'Yes.'

'The woman you are living with –'

'It is enough,' said Herbert.

Hedwig looked at him. He met her gaze with a steadiness that had not been his before. That was new in him. That was not the boy who had stood with his hand on his hip and worn the tie, the cleverest of the sons, who asked all the questions and waited for no answer.

She thought: I should not have sent him.

Then she thought: who else should have gone.

Then she thought: after what happened to him in Zgoda. There she stopped. What lay beyond – the connection one might have drawn from it – that was not her territory. She had sent him because she had fled with the children when the Red Army came; in Troppau word came that Gleiwitz was free again; someone had had to look after the house. That the Poles would be controlling the roads in Ratibor no one had foreseen. What happened then had happened. That she had sent him and what had happened in Zgoda were two different things, and she kept them apart, because one had to keep them apart if one wanted to carry on.

'I was at Aunt Vika's this week,' she said. 'In Ibbenbüren. She sends her greetings.'

Herbert nodded. 'How is she?'

'Well. As always.' Hedwig made a brief pause. 'Your grandmother too.'

Herbert nodded again, and the subject was exhausted, as subjects became exhausted when one stood facing each other like this – she on the landing, he on the cobblestones, the stairs between them – and did not know what else to say, and when what one might have said was too heavy for a farm in Steinbeck on a Sunday afternoon.

'Have you been to the housing office again?' he asked.

'Last week. Nothing.'

Herbert nodded. He had expected nothing else.

'It is provisional,' said Hedwig.

That was the answer, and Herbert knew it, and he asked no more.

In the doorway above stood Petra and watched. Hedwig saw it from the corner of her eye: the child who always watched, the hair grown back, the knees slightly bent, the weight on the balls of its feet.

Petra saw how Hedwig looked at Herbert. Not the look with which she inspected the children when she wanted to know whether they were tidy, whether they had eaten enough. Something else. Something that was heavy and had no form that Petra knew.

She saw the distance between the two of them: Herbert on the cobblestones, Hedwig on the landing, the stairs between them that no one went up and no one came down. She did not understand what the distance meant. But she saw that the distance was there, and that it was there by intention, and that both of them maintained it without naming it.

Herbert coughed once, briefly, a dry sound that he muffled with his hand. Then he stood still again.

'The doctor says by autumn,' he said.

'Which doctor?'

'The one in Recke.'

'The one in Ibbenbüren told me something different.'

'I know,' said Herbert. Then he was silent, longer than necessary.

He did not say that he found the doctor in Recke more credible. He did not say that he trusted the doctor in Ibbenbüren less.

Hedwig looked at him. He met her gaze.

You sent me.

He did not say it. He would not say it, not today, not next week, probably never. She knew that. He knew that she knew. That was the distance between them, measured not in metres but in what was not said and weighed on both: on her the question she did not think to the end; on him the anger he did not show. He had learned what one did when the mother suffered. He had learned it from her.

'I must go,' said Herbert.

'Yes,' said Hedwig.

'I will come next week.'

'Good.'

He turned and went, across the cobblestones, around the corner of the farm buildings. Hedwig watched after him until he was gone. Then she stood for a moment on the landing, her hands at her sides, and looked at the cobblestones where he had stood.

Then she turned around.

Petra was still standing in the doorway.

'What are you staring at,' said Hedwig.

She moved Petra aside and stepped into the room. The door closed behind them.

8

Ten kilometres to Ibbenbüren. Hedwig rode the bicycle she had borrowed from Karl Temme. Petra sat on the rear rack, her hands clasped in Hedwig's coat, the doll held firm under her arm, and said nothing. That was good. Ten kilometres with a child that talked were longer than ten kilometres with a child that said nothing.

The way led through fields, then past Pommeresche, then fields again, then the first houses of Ibbenbüren. It was a mild day late in March, the air still cool but the sun already with weight. Hedwig pedalled steadily, without haste, her back straight. She thought of nothing in particular. Then she thought briefly of Anna's mother. The old farmer's wife in her room, the knitting needles, the steady movement of the hands. Then she let the thought go and pedalled on.

The Pension Möller lay in the Bült, a little off the Marktstraße. A three-storey house, pale rendered, with a sign beside the door that one could barely read because it had weathered. Hedwig helped Petra down from the rack and leaned the bicycle against the house wall.

'You behave,' she said.

Petra nodded.

They rang. A woman opened, mid-fifties, glanced briefly, stepped to one side. Hedwig no longer needed to give Vika's name. The woman had known her for some time and let them in. The stairs to the second floor were narrow, the railing shook. Petra held onto it, although Hedwig had signalled her not to. Hedwig said nothing.

Vika opened the door before Hedwig could knock.

She was a year older than Hedwig, but age had not yet marked her. Shorter, broader still in the shoulders, her hair grey, short and neat, her hands controlled. She wore a dark wool dress and a cardigan, fastened to the top, although the room was warm. Her eyes went straight to Petra, then back to Hedwig.

'You are late,' said Vika.

'It is ten kilometres,' said Hedwig.

The two sisters looked at each other for a moment. No greeting; that had long since become superfluous between them. Then Vika stepped aside and let them in.

The room was small: two beds, a table, two chairs, a shelf, a wardrobe. Orderly to the last corner, with Vika's order, which was stricter than Hedwig's, because she had no children to call it into question, and because she had no other choice: she lived in this room with Lotte, her friend, a former colleague from the school in Gleiwitz who now likewise lived in Ibbenbüren. Lotte was not there. 'She is at the seamstress's,' said Vika, without further explanation, and Hedwig nodded without asking.

Petra sat down on the chair assigned to her, the doll on her knees. She looked at it for a moment, then straightened its little dress, smoothed it, examined the result. Vika looked at the child, calmly, without blinking.

Petra looked at the doll.

'She has grown,' said Vika.

'A little,' said Hedwig.

'She looks pale.'

'She had a cold.'

Vika nodded, once, the judgement concluded. Then she turned to Hedwig, and the tone changed, imperceptibly.

'How are you really?'

'I manage,' said Hedwig.

'You said that last time too.'

'Because it was so last time too.'

They took no roundabout paths with each other. That was something Hanna, their mother, had taught them too, in her way: that one gritted one's teeth, that one carried on, that one did not complain. It had not been a bad lesson. Only it had taught them other things too, things one would have been better not to have learned.

'Herbert comes once a week now,' said Hedwig.

'I know. He wrote.'

'He is still coughing.'

'He will stop coughing when he eats enough.' Vika stood up, abruptly, and went to the shelf. 'I have something for the children.' She took out a small parcel, wrapped in newspaper, and put it on the table. 'Rusks. Baked by Lotte.'

Petra looked at the parcel and then looked at Hedwig.

'Say thank you,' said Hedwig.

'Thank you,' said Petra, to the parcel.

'Look at me when you thank someone,' said Vika.

Petra looked at Vika. Vika's gaze met her, and Petra held it for a moment, then looked back at the doll.

Hedwig opened her handbag and took out the small hand mirror she always carried. She laid it on Petra's knee without saying anything. Petra looked at it. Then she took it.

'Now then,' said Hedwig, and turned to Vika. 'The housing office.'

Vika poured lemon balm tea from a pot that had been standing on the small stove in the corner. Her hands as she poured: the right hand at the handle, the left beneath, a movement Hedwig knew. It was familiar to her because their mother had poured tea in the same way, with the same position of the hands, and for a brief moment her body flinched at something that had nothing to do with the tea.

She took the cup and drank.

'The housing office,' said Vika. It was not a question.

'Nothing. Again.'

'You must be more persistent.'

'I am persistent.'

'More persistent than that.' Vika set down her cup. 'I know a woman who works at the office. In Recke. I can ask her.'

'I do not need intercession.'

'You need a larger flat,' said Vika.

That was the end of that conversation. Hedwig drank her tea.

Petra sat on her chair and held the mirror before her, in both hands, her face close to it.

'How is Mother?' Hedwig asked.

'As always.' Vika glanced briefly at the window. 'Her leg pains her when she walks. She does not complain.'

'No,' said Hedwig. 'She never has.'

The two sisters were silent for a moment, both knowing what lay behind that sentence: a woman who had never complained, who had raised ten children, who had struck when it was too much for her, who had never asked whether it was too much for anyone else. That was Hanna Piontek. At the same time Hanna Piontek had been more than this. But the other had no name that Hedwig knew.

Hedwig had worked out her own standards – not from books but from what she had observed and refused. Hanna had punished when it was too much for her. That was not a principle of upbringing. That was a mother who was worn out and who let it out, and nothing more. Hedwig wanted the child to know why. That was the foundation.

Hedwig considered herself a modern woman. That was not vanity; it was an assessment she held to be correct. She had not lived as Hanna had lived: no zinc bathtub, no striking from exhaustion, no carrying on without direction. She had had a tiled bathroom. She had read, listened, selected what was useful to her. The modern was not abstract to her – it was tangible: in the order of the house, in the predictability of punishment, in the hygiene that was not wealth but bearing.

That was what had appealed to her about National Socialism then: that it was young. Fresh. As though someone had opened the windows. Not the flags, not the parades, that was theatre. But the bearing behind it: that something was over and something new was beginning.

The names of the twins – Petra and Uwe – she had found in a National Socialist women's magazine, in a travel piece. She had liked them because they had sounded new, unspent, of a world that was not her mother's.

The sound of her parents' house, which was also the sound of Tarnowitz, still came back to her sometimes when she did not expect it: the language her parents had spoken with each other when the children were not supposed to listen. What language it had been she had never found out. The sound had remained: denser than German, as though each word held more than there was room for, with a quiet humming in the middle that Silesian did not have. A language in which nothing was lost.

'Without Lotte I would still be in the attic room that the rain came into,' said Vika. 'She took me in when a bed came free here. There was no room for Mother, but –' She set down the cup. 'In Tecklenburg the bed is at least dry.'

'The woman she is living with is orderly,' said Hedwig.

'Yes,' said Vika. 'She is.'

There was nothing more to say about it. They had all sat in the same goods wagon, from Upper Silesia to Rheine, with diversions and stops that no one had planned and no one understood. In Rheine they had been separated: loaded onto different lorries, British and German. Their mother to Tecklenburg, Vika to Ibbenbüren, Hedwig with the children to Steinbeck, the last kilometres on a horse-drawn cart. The expulsion had sorted the family as the wind sorts leaves: by weight and direction, without order.

Petra was still holding the mirror. What she saw in it was her face. What she thought was not to be seen.

Hedwig set down her cup.

'The priest,' she said, without particular inflection. 'When we stand at the portal after Mass. I take note. He always looks at us, the children too.'

Vika glanced briefly at Petra, who was turning the mirror, holding it nearer, extending it away again.

'And then I say to them: see how the priest looks at you,' said Hedwig. 'A child must learn that. That others see one.'

Vika said nothing. Her gaze rested for a moment on Petra, then she turned back to Hedwig.

'We must go back,' said Hedwig. 'The two boys.'

Vika nodded. She stood up and helped Petra into her coat, without asking whether Petra needed help, and Petra let it happen, quietly, put her arms obediently into the sleeves. Vika smoothed the collar, once, with both hands, and looked at the child.

'You are my godchild,' said Vika. 'You know that.'

'Yes,' said Petra.

'What does that mean?'

Petra looked at her. 'That you pray for me.'

'And?'

A pause. 'That you look after me.'

'Correct,' said Vika.

Petra had laid the mirror on the chair when she stood up. Hedwig took it and put it back in her handbag.

They rode back, Petra again on the rear rack, the fields on either side, the sun lower now, Hedwig pedalled steadily and thought of nothing. Then she thought briefly of Vika in Lotte's room, of the two beds, of Vika's order, which was stricter than her own. Vika had never married. That had always been so; there had been no occasion to think about it, it was simply so.

Then she thought: Anna's mother. The old farmer's wife in her room on the upper floor of the Brinkmann farm, also dependent and also not dependent. Both old, both in a room that was no longer quite their own – in different ways.

Then she pedalled on.

Ibbenbüren lay behind her. Steinbeck lay before her. Petra held to her coat, the doll clamped firm under her arm, and said nothing, and that was good.

9

The evening had been good, without there having been any particular occasion for it. The food had been enough, the children had made no difficulties, and Hedwig had drunk a cup of coffee after the washing-up, from Emil's tin, which she kept for such evenings. The coffee was strong and good, stronger than anything she had drunk in recent years, and it had left a warmth that was still there when she went into the back room.

'Time to pray,' she said.

The three children knelt at the edge of the beds: Klaus at his narrow bed against the wall, Uwe and Petra side by side at the two beds to the side. Hedwig's bed stood right beside the door. She knelt beside it, on the floorboards, facing the children, and folded her hands.

The Lord's Prayer first, as always.

'Our Father, who art in heaven,' said Hedwig. 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' said the children.

Klaus spoke loudly and steadily, beginning each line before Hedwig had finished. He was twelve, and he believed what he prayed, as children believe: completely, without asking whether it was true, because the question was not yet there. Uwe joined in, but his gaze went sometimes to the ceiling, where a crack ran through the wood that he knew and that he sometimes followed when he thought no one noticed. Hedwig noticed. She said nothing, because Uwe was eight and because it would come in time.

Petra had closed her eyes. That had always been so, since she had been able to pray: eyes closed, hands folded, the mouth forming the words. That was as it should be. One closed one's eyes when praying because then one was present to it. Whether Petra was truly present to it, or whether she closed her eyes because the mother knew it that way and because one did what the mother knew – that could not be distinguished. Perhaps it was the same thing.

'Amen.' 'Amen.'

Then the Hail Mary. Hedwig had known it since her childhood, since Tarnowitz, since the evenings when her mother had knelt before the small picture of the Madonna and the children around her, and the prayer was written into Hedwig's body as breathing was, as the folding of hands, as the sign of the cross on the children's foreheads.

'Hail Mary, full of grace.' 'Hail Mary, full of grace.'

After the Hail Mary a brief pause. Then the petitions that were not in the prayer book, that Hedwig herself had formulated, once, many months ago, and that had remained the same since, because they contained what was necessary and because what was necessary had not changed.

'Dear God, let Vati return to us in health.' 'Dear God, let Vati return to us in health.'

Ernst, who was in America, on a farm somewhere in California, doing harvest work, learning English, saying *how are you* and who would soon be coming home. Soon was no date. Soon was the word one needed to keep the evening going.

'Let Werner remain in health.' 'Let Werner remain in health.'

Werner was twenty and was studying in Jena, in the Eastern Zone, where the Russians were. That was provisional, as everything was provisional, but with Werner the provisional was harder to bear, because the Russians were the Russians. Werner wrote occasionally, short letters, matter-of-fact as he himself was, and Hedwig read them and put them in the tin. That he ate was in the letters. Whether he ate enough was not. And whether he could come back was not there either.

Werner was the eldest. She had seen him go as an anti-aircraft auxiliary, fifteen years old, with his school books in one hand and his kit in the other. Then the Labour Service, then the Wehrmacht, then the silence, months of it, until he had sent word from the Eastern Zone: *I am alive, in health, staying for now.* He was studying, he wrote. How exactly that worked, without his school-leaving certificate, in the Eastern Zone, with the Russians – he had not explained, and Hedwig had not asked. It was better if he was occupied. That had to be enough.

'Let Herbert become well.' 'Let Herbert become well.'

Herbert, who was coughing. Herbert, whose lung was working, as the doctor in Ibbenbüren had said. Hedwig had not forgotten this formulation: *the lung is working.* As though working were the goal, as though working were enough. She prayed for Herbert's lung, because the lung was something one understood. Because the whole person included the soul as well, she prayed for his soul too. Even though she did not know what to ask for the soul. What Herbert carried in his soul, since the camp, since the trek, since all of it – that was territory Hedwig did not enter, not even in prayer.

She prayed for the body and the immortal soul of her husband and her children, because that was the only thing she knew and could name. What went on within people – what Herbert carried in his soul, what Werner thought when he was silent, what Petra sought when she looked – that was God's territory, not hers. She had no language for it, and she had had no occasion to seek one. That God took care of the rest: that was not indifference. That was trust, and it was complete.

'Amen.' 'Amen,' said the children.

Petra opened her eyes.

Hedwig stood up, her joints stiff from kneeling on the hard floor, and went to the shelf in the front room. There stood the egg cup – white porcelain, the small picture of the Black Madonna beside it, as always. In Gleiwitz a small ceramic holy water font had hung in the house, with a blue rim, a wedding gift from Vika. She had not been able to bring that to Steinbeck. Occasionally she took a cough mixture bottle to church. Inside the church, to the right of the portal, was a stoup from which she filled it. In the room the bottle stood behind the egg cup on the shelf. The egg cup did what it was meant to do.

Carefully, not to spill anything, she carried the egg cup into the back room, dipped her thumb and made the sign of the cross on each child's forehead: Klaus, Uwe, Petra. Then she crossed herself, the large sign of the cross over forehead, breast and shoulders.

'Sleep,' she said.

In the front room it was quiet. Hedwig took the coffee cup from the shelf and sat down at the table. The coffee was cold, but she drank it all the same, slowly, the last of it from the cup.

She thought of nothing in particular.

That was seldom. Most often she thought of what still needed doing, or of what had not been right, or of Ernst who was not there, or of Werner who was in Jena, or of Herbert who was coughing. But now, after the prayer and the coffee, her head was empty in a way that felt good.

She rinsed the empty cup in the water pail. Then she turned out the light.

10

It was Easter Sunday, and Petra needed to be dressed.

Hedwig had altered the dress the week before: a pale blue wool dress that the priest's housekeeper had given her, too small for the housekeeper's granddaughter, too large for Petra, but fitting well enough after the alterations. She had turned the hem up once, redrawn a seam, detached the white collar and sewn it on again because it had sat crooked. The dress was not new. But it was neat, and neat was what counted.

When the people of Steinbeck saw Hedwig, they saw a refugee woman. That was the word they used, in passing, without malice, as though it were an occupation. Hedwig had heard it, in church, at the baker's, on the way to the housing office: the refugee woman who lives with the Brinkmanns. She had heard it and said nothing, because one said nothing, and because saying something would not have changed anything. But she thought it, every time she heard it: she was not a refugee woman. A refugee woman was someone who had had nothing and left. She had had something, and she had not left. She had been removed by force and her house and everything in it had been stolen from her.

Her children went to Mass properly turned out. That was the least she could do.

The white collar of the dress was no longer quite white, but after washing white enough to show that one had tried.

'Come,' said Hedwig.

Petra sat down on the chair beside the table, upright, hands in her lap, before Hedwig could say anything.

Hedwig took the comb.

The hair had grown back, even now, with a straight fringe that Hedwig had cut for her. Hedwig saw the curls and thought briefly of the scissors that two years ago, on the floor of the vastly overcrowded gymnasium in Troppau, had had to deal with the lice, the bald skull afterwards, months of it beneath the lace cloth. She combed.

Combing was a task like other tasks: one began at the end, not at the root, worked forward, was thorough. Hedwig was thorough. She felt how Petra flinched slightly beneath the comb when it met a resistant place, and she slowed there, a moment, before moving on.

Petra turned her head.

'Hold still,' said Hedwig.

Petra held still and looked at her.

What did this look want? Hedwig knew and did not know. Petra had looked at her since she could think, with this look that was too direct, that wanted too much, that waited for something Hedwig did not have or could not give or both. It was not an insolent look. That was the difficulty: not an insolent look that one could answer. A waiting look, and that was worse.

The dress first, then the stockings, then the shoes, which Hedwig had polished with the old rag that smelled of pork rind and lay right at the bottom of the shelf. The shoes were too small, they pinched at the toes, but for this Mass they would serve once more.

Then the collar. It needed smoothing, with the finger, because the iron had not grown hot enough this morning. Hedwig smoothed it with both hands, from inside to out, evenly, and Petra sat still and let it happen, face turned upward, eyes half closed.

Poppet, Hedwig thought, without saying it. She thought it because Petra was so small, so precisely her own miniature: the shoulders, the short neck, the hands that were already Hedwig's hands in small. So neat now, the pale blue dress, the white collar. *The priest will see you today*, Hedwig thought. That was not a thought she spoke aloud. It was simply there: Petra would be seen, and this was how she should look when she was seen.

The fingers slid over the collar, smoothed it flat, and for a moment – the palm lay on Petra's shoulder, warm through the wool – there was the impulse to leave the hand there. To lay the palm on the child's head, on the hair that had finally grown back. Nothing great. Only that.

She drew the hand back and smoothed the collar once more, as though that had been the only reason.

Whoever grew accustomed to touch suffered when it was absent. She knew that. Vika had been that way as a child too, had reached and held on, and the mother had broken her of it, not gently. Hedwig wanted to do it differently: not more harshly, but more clearly. The child should know what was and what was not. No false expectations that would at some point go unmet. One did the child no service.

What stood in Petra's look had no name that Hedwig knew. Not because she had not looked. But because the language she had came to an end there.

'Done,' she said. 'Go to your brothers.'

Through the wall, muffled, Anna Brinkmann's voice, then the old farmer's wife's answer, quieter still. A conversation one did not understand, only the tone, the rhythm: two women talking together as women talked who had time and who knew each other. Then a brief laugh, little more than an exhalation, that the wall did not quite muffle.

Hedwig heard it. She turned to the stove.

Petra had stood up. She went to the door, her shoulders drawn slightly back, her gaze already towards the back room.

'And tell Klaus to show his shoes,' said Hedwig.

Then she began to prepare the midday meal that would need to be ready soon after Mass: the cooked sausage the farmer's wife had given her because it was Easter, the potatoes that needed peeling.

Behind her: a movement, a breath.

She did not turn round. She knew what was there.

'What are you staring at,' said Hedwig.

No further sentence. Hedwig's back. Petra's gaze.

11

It was a Thursday, the thirty-first of August, and the afternoon was warm and still, as afternoons late in August in the Upper Silesian industrial district could be: the air quiet, no wind, the sun still with weight but without the heaviness of high summer.

The twins were asleep in the cradle that had had to be acquired for them – wider than the old one, but easy to carry, a sensible piece. Ernst carried it every morning from the bedroom into the kitchen so that Hedwig could keep them in view. Uwe on his side, the fist beside his face. Petra on her back, arms raised, palms open. Their breathing was even and barely audible, and Hedwig heard it nonetheless, through everything else, because she had learned that in the six months since their birth: to hear her children's breathing even when she was not listening for it.

Above the table the devotional picture, beside it the wooden cross from Tarnowitz, and to the left of it, on a small hook, the bronze Cross of Honour of the German Mother that she had received in May.

She stood at the kitchen window and looked into the garden.

Werner and Herbert sat at the garden table, which was meant for afternoon coffee and which offered more room than the kitchen table when exercise books and textbooks and rulers all needed to be out at once. Werner had his head bent over his exercise book, pen in hand, and wrote without stopping, that Hedwig knew: Werner finished what he had started before doing anything else. Beside the exercise book lay, neatly folded, his uniform for the evening meeting. Herbert, who had been attending the secondary school for only two weeks, sat opposite him, his book open before him. But his gaze lay on Werner's exercise book.

A little apart, on a stool near the house wall, sat Erna, the Pflichtjahr girl. At her feet stood the basket of freshly harvested plums, and she reached into it without looking. On her lap she held the bowl over which she worked: halved, the stone broken out, the flesh in, the stone into the enamel bucket to her left. The work stained her fingers pink and left splashes on her apron, which was why Hedwig had not set her at the garden table, where the exercise books lay.

Hedwig's gaze rested on Erna a moment longer than on her two eldest. The girl worked steadily, that was not the problem. But the way she had placed the bucket beside her – too close, and slightly tilted – would lead to her knocking it over next time she stood up. Hedwig looked away. It was not the moment.

Klaus played a little apart. He was kneeling on the garden path shooting marbles against the kerb, with the concentration of a five-year-old discovering a technique. He talked as he did so, half under his breath, to himself or to an opponent only he could see – with Klaus that was sometimes not distinguishable.

Ernst had not worked today. He had gone to the office in the morning, as always, but they had sent him away again at once – because of the general situation, the superior had said, and Ernst had nodded as though he knew what the general situation was, although he did not know, or not in the sense the word had been meant. He had told Hedwig and then gone outside again, to

pick the last of the plums and then to look for beetles in the asparagus bed. After the midday meal he had gone to the hedges.

Hedwig had taken note of it as she took note of many things: fully and without comment. The hedges belonged to Ernst as the garden belonged to Ernst, and when he went to the hedges that was his right, and the house went on regardless, because the house always went on.

She stood at the window and looked.

It was a good sight: the children in the garden, the work being done, the afternoon going its way. Werner, who was writing. Herbert, who was reading or not reading. Erna, whose hands worked steadily. Klaus, who was talking quietly, although no one was listening. And behind it all the trellis along the side, the beans, the new fruit trees that were still young and would bear fruit in ten years.

The house was full. That was good.

She looked, and as she looked she let her hand rest on the window ledge, and thought nothing in particular: only this picture, this garden, these children who did not know that someone was watching.

If one raised one's gaze a little, at the horizon, not four hundred metres away: the transmitter tower, shaped like a slender A, of larch wood, sharp in the sunlight by day, illuminated at night, a mast of light.

Hedwig did not raise her gaze. She turned and went into the bathroom.

The light lay slant on the tiles, a long strip from the west, through the high-set window. The sun stood low, earlier than last week, August was drawing to its close, and the light already had that faint reddening it would have in autumn when summer was truly past.

The tiles were white.

Hedwig stood in the doorway and looked, a moment, before she entered. She did that sometimes, this brief pause in the doorway, without knowing why: perhaps because the room needed a moment before one entered it, because it had something one did not simply pass through. The washbasin, the porcelain handle of the tap. The bath on its claw feet, white inside, painted white outside. The bathroom stove in the corner, cold today, its flue disappearing through the wall to the outside. The window, with the clear, bubble-free glass that one found in newer houses.

She went in and let her eyes move over the tiles, row by row, from left to right, from top to bottom, as one reads a page. She did that every day, not mechanically – consciously: after cleaning, go over the tiles, check that everything was right. Today everything was right.

The grouting clean, the surfaces without mark, the join at the floor tight. That was the house, and that was the bathroom, and that was hers, and that she had.

She turned and went out.

12

The house was still. The children were asleep. The blackout frames stood in the window reveals – Hedwig had put them in that evening, accurately, because that was how it was done now, because it was required. She disliked it. Not the duty itself, that was the duty, but that the house now stood like that, blind to the outside, like a house that had nothing to show. She liked it when there was light in the windows in the evening and one could see it from the street.

It was dark outside, darker than usual: the tower too was not illuminated, the hundred and twelve metres of larch wood that had always been a mast of light at night.

Ernst lay on his back and looked into the dark.

'Are you asleep?' he said.

'No,' said Hedwig.

It was after eleven. They had put the twins to bed at eight, the older ones at half past, and then the evening had been quiet, too quiet, Ernst at the radio and Hedwig with her darning, and neither had said much, because the day had had something about it that had not been easy to put into words.

Ernst turned towards Hedwig.

'At the tower today,' he said. 'There was a man. One I know, from the site, I don't even know his name. He sent me away.'

Hedwig said nothing. He heard her breathing, even, waiting.

'Just like that. You have to go now, the site is not accessible today. As though I were some stranger.' He paused briefly. 'And yet I was there when the hedges had not yet been planted. I planted those hedges.'

Hedwig lay still. Then she said: 'They always have something they cannot talk about. You know that.'

Ernst was silent.

'Exercises, or an inspection, or whatever. They do not tell one in advance.'

'Yes,' said Ernst.

'Tomorrow you can go again.'

That was probably true. That was probably the simplest and the most correct. Tomorrow Brauer would be at the gate again, the guard with the unchanging face, and would let him through as always, and the hedges would be there as always, and the site would be as always. That was the explanation, and it fitted.

'Yes,' said Ernst again.

Hedwig turned onto her other side. He heard her breathing settle and no longer seek.

Ernst lay awake.

The night sounded as it had yesterday and the day before. But the tower lay in darkness. Even without the blackout frames, one could not have seen it from the bedroom this night.

He thought of the man who had sent him away. He thought of the site, the silence that was not the usual silence. He thought that Hedwig was probably right, and that tomorrow everything would be normal again.

Then he thought of Emil.

No thought, no connection – only the picture: Emil on a ship. The deck, the water, the horizon. Emil who does not turn round, because he knows what lies behind him, and because it does not stop him. The picture had no colour and no detail; it was only the picture itself, as it always came when Ernst lay awake and looked into the dark.

He had not answered Emil. The letter from the spring, in which Emil had written about the American newspapers, then: *take care* – he had not answered. He had considered that the right thing at the time, and he still did, more or less. Emil exaggerated. Emil had always exaggerated when it came to Germany, because Emil saw Germany from the outside and because from the outside everything looked larger.

And yet.

He turned onto his side. Hedwig was asleep, her back to him, her shoulders still. He had known this back for fifteen years. He knew the way she slept: completely, without remainder.

The darkness.

At some point Ernst too fell asleep.

13

Werner and Herbert left early, their school bags under their arms, their scarves in place. Ernst left a quarter of an hour later, with his briefcase, his hat.

Hedwig cleared the table. The twins were fretting in the cradle, Uwe with a sound that was not yet a word, Petra with another. They lay there as they always lay, and Hedwig cleared the table, because the work did not wait, even if the children fretted. They knew that by now.

Klaus sat on the floor in the hallway with his wooden rifle and was conducting a campaign of which only he knew the details.

Ernst came back soon.

He opened the front door and stepped into the kitchen, his briefcase still in his hand, as though he had forgotten to set it down. Hedwig held a cloth in her hand and looked at him.

He said: 'They have sent me home again.'

He said it because it needed to be said before he knew what it meant. On the way to work, at the corner of Am Feldrain, Schumacher from the neighbouring office had called something to him: at the transmitter, last night, attack, Poland. Ernst had not asked, he had walked on, to the office, because one went to the office. The superior had intercepted him in the corridor. They did not need him today. The office was otherwise occupied. He should go home.

Hedwig said nothing.

Ernst put the briefcase in the hallway and went into the sitting room. He turned on the radio.

The click, the orange of the dial – Gleiwitz, Breslau, Wien, Paris – then the half minute until the valves warmed up. And then: music. Solemn, heavy, an orchestra announcing something without yet saying what.

Hedwig dried her hands and came into the sitting room. She sat down on the chair beside the sofa. Ernst sat on the sofa, his hands on his knees.

Klaus, who had followed them, let his wooden rifle hang and looked at the radio.

The music stopped. A voice: in a few moments the Führer would speak before the German Reichstag in the Krolloper, the broadcast would begin shortly. Then music again, and then silence.

From the kitchen the twins, fretting, then quiet again, then fretting again.

Ernst said nothing. He sat and looked at the radio.

Hedwig sat and looked at the radio.

Klaus took up the wooden rifle again and continued his campaign. Half under his breath he gave orders to an army that obeyed only him.

Shortly after ten the broadcast from the Krolloper began.

Hitler's voice, which they both knew, from the radio, from speeches they had sometimes heard and sometimes not. Now they listened.

He spoke at length. He spoke of Poland, of border violations, of patience that was now exhausted. And then the sentence:

Since 5.45 this morning, fire is being returned.

Hedwig sat and listened.

That was right. That was finally right. The Poles had provoked for years, had oppressed the Germans in Poland, had staged incidents at the border, and the government had accepted it, long enough. Too long. Now the answer had been given, and the answer was fitting. That was how simple it was.

Her second thought was: the blackout frames. They would not be staying only for a few days now. That would go on for weeks, perhaps longer. The house was not well off when one could not see it. One did not see it when it was dark, one did not see that the windows were clean, that behind these windows lived a family that kept up its standards. She disliked it. It was duty, and she would fulfil it, but she disliked it.

Ernst said nothing.

He had listened and was silent now, his hands still on his knees. He looked at the radio, but seemed in thought to be somewhere else. What he was thinking Hedwig did not know exactly. Perhaps he was thinking of the man at the tower who had sent him away yesterday. Perhaps he was thinking of what was unfolding now, slowly, in a way one could not yet see but could feel. He had been sent home. The office was otherwise occupied. That said something, and he did not yet know what.

He turned the radio down, but left it on.

At midday Hedwig made fried potatoes.

That was potatoes and onions, there was nothing else in the house, and it was enough. She cut, let the fat grow hot, put the slices in the pan. The sizzling, the smell of onions in hot fat, and through the door the radio, which was now playing march music.

Ernst came to the kitchen door and looked in, said nothing, went away again.

The twins were asleep now. Klaus had put his wooden rifle down somewhere and sat at the kitchen table and waited.

Hedwig turned the potatoes. Outside was a Friday afternoon, the same street, the same houses, the same sky. Somewhere, far to the east, fire was being returned.

She turned the potatoes.

14

It was a Friday evening, late in October, and the house was still in the way it was still when five children are asleep and the night has begun.

Ernst sat at the kitchen table. Hedwig stood opposite him and was cleaning the two storm lanterns she had brought up from the cellar: she took off the glass chimneys, cleaned the sooty glass with newspaper and whiting and then trimmed the wicks carefully straight so that they would not smoke. The sun had long set, and the blackout frames sat in the window reveals.

Usually Ernst, when the evening quiet had begun in the house, went down once more to the cellar to fetch a bottle of Tichauer. Today he stayed sitting.

'I have been thinking,' he said.

He said it without preamble.

Hedwig heard the tone. She put down the scissors and then began to fill the first lamp base with paraffin from a brown glass bottle through a small funnel.

'About the war and about everything.'

Hedwig heard: the house. She set the paraffin bottle on the table and said nothing.

The silence lasted as long as it lasted. Ernst looked at his hands.

'The house,' he said at last.

Hedwig pushed the storm lanterns to one side and then sat down, opposite him, at the table. The work was not yet finished. But she sat down now, because this sentence required a different kind of answer than standing.

'No,' she said.

Not loud. Not sharp. Only the word, complete.

Ernst looked up. 'Hedi. With the war –'

'The war changes nothing about the house.'

'It would be good to have money. If I am called up –'

'Then we live here, and you come back.'

He leaned back. 'We do not know that.'

'No,' said Hedwig. 'We do not know that.'

A pause.

'I will not sell the house,' she said. 'We built that.'

Ernst said nothing. He knew what that meant – he had known it for fifteen years, he did not need to ask: the zinc bathtub in Tarnowitz, Heinrichau, the service flat, the forms for the building loan. He knew what this house was, and he knew that he would have no good answer now.

She folded her hands on the table and looked at him.

'The children have a bathroom,' she said. 'No one takes that from me.'

Somewhere in her, for a moment, a word that had no history yet, that did not yet mean what it would mean eight years later: refugee. It came without direction, without connection, and was immediately gone again. She thought: the bathroom. The tiles. This.

Ernst rubbed his face with both hands. Then he let them fall and looked at the table.

For a while neither said anything.

'Emil,' said Ernst then. He had not meant to speak the name, and then it was there nonetheless.

Hedwig looked at him. She knew the place Emil occupied in Ernst's inner life: the thing Ernst had never thought to the end, and which Emil embodied.

'Emil,' she said, 'left a family behind.'

That was not quite accurate – Emil had gone alone, without leaving a wife, without leaving children, that was the difference, and both knew it. But it was the heaviest thing she could say without saying what she actually meant.

Ernst looked at the table.

'I know,' he said.

The conversation drifted away after that, not because it was finished, but because no direction remained open to it. They talked on, about the children, about Werner who would soon be thirteen, about the preserving jars that were still in the cellar. The essential had been said. What came after was the surrounding talk with which one ends an evening when one cannot go further.

Then Ernst stood up. 'I'll go to bed.'

'Yes,' said Hedwig.

He went. She heard his steps on the stairs, the step that gave slightly, then the door above.

Hedwig stayed sitting, her hands on the table. Then she stood up and took the paraffin bottle. She filled the second lamp, slowly, with the small funnel, without spilling a drop. Then she screwed the stopper on, set the glass chimneys on both lamps and placed them on the shelf beside the stove, where they belonged from now on.

15

It was a Thursday morning, early in November, and Hedwig was kneeling on the bathroom floor.

That was the first work of the day, after Werner and Herbert had left for school and Ernst for work: the floor. The tiles absorbed moisture overnight, not much, but enough to remain in the grouting if one did not rub it dry, and moisture in the grouting was the beginning of something that Hedwig did not tolerate in this bathroom. The cloth was wrung out, almost dry, and she worked row by row, always from left to right.

When she reached the bottom row, the cloth suddenly caught.

It was barely anything: a slight roughness in the even wiping, as though the cloth had caught on a tiny projection. Hedwig stopped. She looked.

There was the crack.

It was thin as the mark of a hard pencil, diagonal across the lower left corner of a tile, to the left of the washbasin, near the floor. A hairline crack, barely visible, only to be seen if one looked for it or if the cloth caught on it. Hedwig put down the cloth and bent close. She ran the nail of her index finger over the place, once, slowly.

The scratching she heard was faint. But she heard it.

She remained crouching and looked.

It did not go through the tile. That was the first thing she checked: no crack through and through, no loose piece that shifted when one pressed against it. Only the surface, only the glaze. She pressed again with her thumb, harder. The tile sat firm.

It is not growing, she told herself. *It is there, but it is not growing.*

Then she stood up and rinsed out the cloth.

The rest of the morning she worked as she always worked: checked whether the twins were still dry, sent Erna, when she arrived, to Klaus. Boiled and starched Ernst's collar. Weighed the provisions, measured out the flour for Erna. Went through the potatoes in the cellar, set aside two rotten ones. Everything as always.

But the crack was there.

It had not disappeared because she had stopped looking at it. It was in the tile, to the left of the washbasin, near the floor, and it was a hairline crack, and hairline cracks grew if one gave them time. Moisture entered, and in winter the cold followed, and cold drove cracks wider, that was the law of stone and ceramic, and against this law only one thing availed: someone had to come and replace the tile.

That was the practical side. Hedwig thought through the practical side, fully.

And then there was the other side, the one that had no words, that sat deeper than the reasoned assessment of a damaged tile. The conversation from the Friday evening still lay in the room, even though Ernst had talked normally at breakfast the next morning and even though the subject had not come up since. The conversation had ended, but it was not finished. Ernst had proposed selling the house. She had said no. And now the house itself showed a crack.

She did not think that in those words. It was only an unease that weighed more than a hairline crack should weigh.

Frau Golla from the Women's League had warned her recently: tile-layers were scarcely to be had at present. The military authorities had loaded most firms with commissions that admitted no refusal. Hedwig was welcome to use her telephone, Frau Golla had said. But one would not get far on the telephone.

Hedwig thought of this when she left the midday meal to Erna. Smolka would be at his depot at midday, that was her calculation: even a busy man ate. She fetched the Cross of Honour from the kitchen and pinned it to her coat. Then she took the tram into the town.

Smolka's depot lay in the Strachwitzstraße, in the rear courtyard of a late-nineteenth-century building, behind a grey-painted iron door. It smelled of cement and damp clay. Smolka sat on a stool between stacked crates of tiles, a broad man in a work coat. When he saw her enter he set

down the bottle of beer from which he had been drinking, set it on one of the crates and came towards her. When he saw the Cross of Honour on the lapel of her coat he paused briefly.

He was very busy, he said, he could tell her that straight away. Very busy. And it would stay that way, at least until spring, probably longer. He leaned against a stack of crates and began to explain: the Wehrmacht needed tiles, everywhere. Operating theatres in the medical bunkers, fully tiled, hygiene demanded it. The decontamination airlocks, the decontamination rooms – there too: tiles from floor to ceiling, no plaster, no paint, only ceramic, so that one could disinfect. The large kitchens for the Reich Labour Service. The washing facilities in the troop quarters. All commissions that could not wait. All commissions that admitted no latitude.

Hedwig listened. She did not interrupt him.

When he had finished she said: 'It is a hairline crack. To the left of the washbasin, near the floor. One tile. Nothing more.'

Smolka looked at her. Something in his face moved briefly, then did not.

The material was also the problem, he said. Since the spring. Everything went first to the military firms.

Then he said, almost in passing: whiting, rubbed in dry until the crack was white and clean. Then a drop of linseed oil varnish, worked in with the fingertip. The oil would creep into the gap, harden, seal. Then polish until no film of grease remained on the glaze.

Hedwig listened. It was absurd – a tile that needed replacing, to be sealed with oil. But she had no choice.

'As soon as you can come,' she said.

Smolka looked at the Cross of Honour on her coat, then back at her. He reached for a piece of paper and wrote down her name and address.

'Before Christmas without fail,' said Hedwig.

Smolka attempted a smile. 'I'll see what I can do.'

Hedwig nodded and left.

Through the kitchen window: the garden, the beans harvested, the trellis bare, the fruit trees leafless. November had drawn the colour from everything. Only the house stood, the roughcast render, the steep pitched roof, the hallway and the bathroom and the bedrooms, everything in its place.

At supper Hedwig said it.

Ernst sat opposite her, Klaus on his chair, Werner and Herbert on the bench, the twins in the cradle. The food was on the table, and after grace, while Hedwig was ladling the soup, she said, without looking up: 'There is a crack in the bathroom. A hairline crack. In one of the tiles. Smolka is coming before Christmas.'

Ernst looked up. 'Where?'

'To the left of the washbasin. Near the floor.'

He put down his spoon. 'I'll have a look after.'

'You do not need to look,' said Hedwig. 'I have seen it. It is there.'

Ernst ate. After a while he said: 'That is a small thing, Hedi. A hairline crack.'

Hedwig said nothing.

For a while no one said anything. Ernst began to eat. Werner glanced up, then back at his plate – he was old enough to know when one did not ask. Herbert ate on without looking up. Klaus looked from Hedwig to Ernst to Hedwig, then back into his bowl. The twins were asleep.

Her silence held everything she might have said: that a small thing was a small thing when one wanted to sell the house, and no small thing when one kept it. That a small thing, left untreated, grew. That the difference between a small thing and a disaster was in most cases the time one allowed to pass unused before acting.

She did not say that. She ladled more for Klaus and drank a sip of water.

In the evening, when the children were in bed, Hedwig went into the bathroom once more.

Not to do anything. Only to look, because looking was the only thing she could do now, until Smolka came some time before Christmas. She turned on the light. The tiles, white, even, from floor to shoulder height. The washbasin. The stove, cold now, because it was not bath night.

She knelt down, before the place, to the left of the washbasin.

The crack was still there. It had not grown, not since the morning, not in the hours between. It was as large as the first time: a hairline crack, thin as a pencil mark, diagonal across the lower left corner. Barely visible if one did not know where to look.

Hedwig ran her finger over the place. The faint scratching, the same as before.

She stood up.

The bathroom was her space: the tiles, the washbasin, the bath on its claw feet. That was real. That could be touched. That was a proof. The proof now had a flaw, and the flaw would be

repaired before Christmas, and until then it was there, and that was enough to carry on: to know what needed doing, and to know when it would be done.

She turned out the light.

16

Hedwig was kneeling on the bathroom floor wiping the grouting.

That was the work one did as soon as Werner and Herbert had left for school and Ernst for work: the floor, the grouting, the places where moisture was and was not permitted to stay. The cloth was almost dry, the movement steady, row by row. The tiles were white.

They were always white. And the white always had something in it that reminded her of something she had once seen, briefly, through a door she had opened by mistake.

Heinrichau, summer 1919. She had been nineteen, in her second year of service, and she knew the corridors by then, most of them at any rate. The door at the narrow corridor at the end of the main wing, second floor, left: that one she had not yet opened, because there had never been an occasion. There were no occasions. One opened doors when one had an errand, and when one had none, they remained closed.

That morning she had been carrying a jug, an empty one that she was to return, and she had gone wrong, had turned off one door too early, had opened the wrong door – and had closed it again at once, because one did not do that.

But in the seconds between she had seen it.

White tiles, from floor to shoulder. A bath on four claw feet, the water still in it, slightly foamy, a smell of lavender and something heavier, soap perhaps, or the water itself. And at the side, beside the bath: a girl, not much older than Hedwig, in a white apron, who was just folding a towel and raised her head when Hedwig entered. Eyes wide, briefly, then lowered again – the girl had given her a single glance and then taken the next towel.

Hedwig had pulled the door shut. She had gone on down the corridor, the jug in her hand, to the right door.

But the picture had written itself in.

The monastery at Heinrichau was not what one imagined when one said monastery: no austerity, no bare walls, no poverty from conviction, indeed for a long time now there had not even been monks here. The Heinrichau monastery was a baroque complex, four wings about the cloister garth, with a church whose tower could be seen far across the land. One knew one

was in a particular house, not because it made itself important, but because it was simply there. It had what houses have when they have been lived in for generations: a quiet that was not forced.

The Grand Duchess had lived in the monastery since the autumn of 1918, since the revolution had taken the throne from her husband. Officially she was no longer Grand Duchess, Hedwig knew that, everyone knew that. But for Hedwig she remained the Grand Duchess, and her daughters remained the Princesses, because people did not simply cease to be what they were just because something had been decided in Weimar.

The Grand Duchess had lived in this house in a way Hedwig never forgot. She had never explained how something was to be done. She had shown it, once, without words, and afterwards one had known. Not because the Grand Duchess had been strict. But because the way she set down a teacup or entered a room made one want to do it properly.

The bathroom behind the wrong door had been the Grand Duchess's bathroom. Hedwig had found that out later, in passing, from the conversation of the other girls. She had said nothing. She had kept the picture within her: the white tiles, the bath, the light on the water.

Ernst had come there in the spring of the third year, as a gardener.

He was not a well-read man, that was clear from the start, but he had a way with plants that went beyond the craft: he knew how they grew without thinking about it, and the knowledge sat in his hands, not in his head. The gardening at Heinrichau had much to do – rose trellises, kitchen gardens, a rose garden facing the ornamental front that drew visitors in summer – and the men who worked there were mostly quiet, because the work demanded it.

Ernst was not quiet.

He whistled, on the paths, in the corridors, when he carried tools or cuttings, on the way from the tool room to the grounds or back. One song, always the same, a melody that Hedwig did not know and that was immediately familiar to her nonetheless, because it had the lightness a melody had to have to write itself in.

She heard it for the first time when she was carrying a pail of water through the connecting corridor to the kitchen. The melody came from the right, drew nearer, and Hedwig walked straight on, without stopping, without turning her head. One did not stop. One did not look.

But she heard it.

Art thou here, laughing fortune – that was the melody, as she found out later. A song from an operetta she did not know, by a composer she did not know. What she knew was the melody, and the melody had stayed with her.

Her great-grandmother had been a von Holly, the daughter of an officer, her name was Josepha. Hanna, her mother, had told her that once, at kitchen work, in passing, as one says something one has known for a long time oneself. Josepha had married a village schoolmaster, for love, a Chalupka, and had lived with him in modest circumstances. But their children had godparents from the best circles, and they had always looked well turned out. The daughter, Hedwig's grandmother, was still reproached by Josepha as a married woman if she wore a headscarf – only farm women did that. The great-grandmother had insisted on good appearance and proper conduct, that required no justification. Josepha herself had always worn a starched cap with lace trimming.

Hedwig had not forgotten that.

Her mother had also told her, without emphasis, at another task, that the Piontek, whose name they both bore, was old Silesian stock. One knew that if one had it in oneself. What exactly that meant, Hedwig did not know. Silesian, old, the roots somewhere between Tarnowitz and Gleiwitz. The mother had not said more, and Hedwig had not asked more.

In Heinrichau both had given her, without her thinking it in those words, a bearing: she had not come from nothing. She had brought something with her, invisible, but it was there.

The small picture of the Black Madonna that now hung in the kitchen in Petersberg – above the table, beside the wooden cross from Tarnowitz – came from her mother's household. Her mother had given it to her when Hedwig went to Heinrichau: a small devotional picture, the size of a playing card, in a frame of black wood that was chipped at the corners. The Madonna was dark, the face severe, the child on her arm likewise earnest. The picture hung now on the wall of the kitchen, and it would hang there as long as Hedwig had the wall.

Where it had originally come from she did not know exactly. From Tarnowitz, her mother had said. From the family. That was enough.

Hedwig stood up.

The floor was done, the grouting rubbed, the cloth wrung out. Through the high-set window the early morning light fell on the tiles, at a slant, still without warmth. The tiles were white. The grouting was clean.

That was her bathroom. That she had, and that was what she had thought when she saw it for the first time, after moving in, in the summer of 1936: so this is how it is when one has arrived. The bath on its claw feet, the tiles, the clear glass in the window.

She had opened a wrong door, once, and what had been behind it she had not forgotten.

She took the cloth, hung it over the rim of the bath and went into the kitchen to see to the twins.

17

It was Saturday evening. Hedwig pulled the door to the twins' room shut behind her.

Uwe and Petra were asleep. Klaus was asleep. Werner and Herbert lay in their beds, the covers drawn up, as they should be. She stood a moment on the landing and listened into the house: from below the sound of the radio from the sitting room, muffled, a speaker, then music. Ernst.

She went down the stairs. In the bathroom no light burned yet, but the warmth was already there, perceptible through the door: Ernst had heated the bathroom stove an hour before. Tonight was Hedwig's bath night – not the men's, on which Ernst and the sons shared the water, but hers alone, an arrangement that had never been spoken aloud and that held nonetheless. He did it without being asked, because he felt a woman should not carry coals, and because he did it as he did many things: quietly, without making anything of it. Hedwig took the towel from the hook beside the kitchen door and went into the bathroom.

She closed the door behind her. Then the light.

The tiles. The washbasin. The round iron stove in the corner, drawing steadily, the faint crackling of the embers, the warmth that stood in the air like something tangible. Hedwig laid her hand on the bath tap and turned it on. The water came immediately warm: Ernst's punctual preparation. The bath was of enamelled cast iron, heavy, on four claw feet, and it filled slowly. That was all right. She had time.

The bathroom behind the wrong door. The Grand Duchess had had one. Now Hedwig had one.

The water was still running. She sat on the rim of the bath and waited.

In Tarnowitz and later in the service flat there had been no bathroom. One knew that, one did not say it, but one knew it, and if one was honest, one also knew what it meant: the washbowl, the jug, the zinc tub one fetched from the hook in the wash house and carried into the kitchen. All the children in turn, the same water. The mother was last, and the water was then what it was. She had seen that.

She thought that, and then she thought no more about it, because there was no purpose in it.

The water was warm and it was enough. She turned off the tap.

While she undressed she sang. She noticed only when she was already singing: half under her breath, the melody above all, scarcely the words. *Art thou here, laughing fortune – art thou*

here, or does a dream deceive me? The second verse, which she knew by heart, because Ernst had whistled and sung the song so often, in Heinrichau, in the corridors of the palace, and she had come to know it by heart at some point without having learned it.

She sang without noticing until she was well into it. Then she stopped and stepped into the bath.

The bathroom was her space.

That was not an exaggeration. The bathroom belonged to her alone, in a sense that the bedroom did not fulfil and the kitchen did not and the hallway did not. Ernst came in to wash. The children came in to wash. The Pflichtjahr girl used it on certain days. But on this day, at this hour, after supper, when the children were asleep and Ernst sat at the radio, the bathroom was hers, completely, without restriction.

No child knocked. No Ernst asked where something was. The warmth of the stove, the still water, the tiles that ran from floor to shoulder height and which she knew, every single one, because she rubbed them clean every week.

She leaned back, the water to her shoulders.

It enclosed her, warm, evenly warm, and Hedwig lay still a moment and let it happen. The tiles shone in the lamplight, white, evenly white. In the window reveal sat the blackout frame. Faint cracking and ticking came from the metal casing of the bathroom stove, whose interior still held embers.

She let her eyes move over the tiles, row by row, from left to right, from top to bottom. The grouting clean, the surfaces without mark. Everything was right, as far as the eye reached. The crack was there, to the left of the washbasin, near the floor, she knew where it was, she did not need to look: Smolka was coming before Christmas, he had probably ordered the material already, the matter was in order, as far as a matter could be in order that was not yet attended to. In this room, at this hour, she let it rest.

The bathroom proved something. She knew that, even though she had never said it in those words, even though she could not have explained it to anyone else. It proved that the work in Tarnowitz and in Heinrichau and the marriage and the building loan and the forms and everything else – that all of that had led to something that could be touched, that had tiles, that could be wiped down and was then white again.

Ernst had proposed selling the house. She had said no, and that had been right, and she would say it again when it needed to be said again. The house stood. The bathroom stood. The tiles were white.

She thought of nothing in particular. That was seldom. Most often she thought of what still needed doing. But now, in the warmth of the water, her head was empty in a way she did not wish to hold onto, because holding onto it would have destroyed it.

Then, from above: a sound.

Not loud. Barely anything. Petra, who had woken in the darkness of the bedroom, a brief crying, uncertain, that sought, that did not yet know what it wanted.

Hedwig heard it. She stayed lying.

She waited: a moment, two, three. The crying had that quality she knew: no pain, no fever, only the waking in the dark, the moment before the awareness of who one was and where. The child needed itself now, not someone else. If one came immediately, the child learned that it needed someone else. If one waited, the child learned to find itself.

The crying grew quieter. Then it stopped.

Silence.

Hedwig lay in the bath and the water was no longer warm now, but was beginning to be only lukewarm, and the stove glowed, and the tiles shone white in the weak lamplight. Above it was quiet. The child had settled itself, that was good, that was right, that was what a child had to learn.

She stayed lying a moment longer.

Then she stepped out of the bath, dried herself, let the water out, turned off the light and went to bed.

18

It was summer 1940, a Sunday afternoon, and the garden lay in the full light of July.

A year had passed since the August afternoon on which the twins had still been asleep in the cradle and Ernst had been sent home and the transmitter tower had stood on the horizon as always – silent, a hundred and twelve metres of larch wood, as though it were no different on that day from any other. Now France was defeated, the war as good as won, and of the conversation about the house that Ernst had had in October nothing remained but a memory that could be set aside.

Werner and Herbert had been gone since morning, field exercises somewhere in the woods behind Petersberg, that Hedwig knew, nothing more. Klaus was playing Cowboys and Indians

with the Büttner boys on the neighbouring property, he had taken the wooden rifle. Hedwig had quiet, and the quiet was good.

She stood in the kitchen pressing the rusk crumbs onto the sides of the layered cake, evenly, with the flat of her hand, round by round. She had had the sponge baked at the baker's yesterday, assembled the layers this morning, spread the apricot jam, scattered the poppy seed. That was work that suited her: precise, tangible, with a result that was either right or not right. It was right.

Through the window she saw the garden.

Ernst stood at the trellis, his shirt sleeves rolled up. Petra ran towards him, on her short legs over the fine gravel with which he had strewn the paths, and threw herself against his leg, both arms around it. Then she stretched up, head tilted back, eyes on his face.

Ernst laid his hand on her head. He did not need to bend down. That was new, it had been new for some weeks: he could touch the twins' heads when they stood, just like that, in passing, without needing to stoop. He laid his hand on Petra's head and left it there a moment.

Uwe stood a few steps further away, watched, then ran too.

Ernst counted aloud: one, two, three – then disappeared behind the arbour post.

'Where's Papa? Where?' Petra turned, looked at the arbour, looked back at the trellis, looked in the direction of the kitchen. 'Papaaaa!'

She ran to the arbour. Ernst stepped out from behind the post – 'Here I am!' – and she shrieked, and he laughed.

Uwe had approached the search differently: he had stayed standing and waited until Ernst appeared, then toddled towards him, 'There!' – a single word, but fully meant.

'Again!' said Petra. 'Again, Papa!'

Ernst disappeared again. Petra searched, louder this time: 'Papa gone. Where Papa? Here?' She looked behind the arbour, then around the fruit tree, then back again. Uwe stayed standing and watched her.

Hedwig pressed the last round of crumbs onto the cake. She saw that Petra searched and talked as she did so and as she did so informed everyone, running, without pause. She saw that Uwe waited and then found.

Later, because Petra had asked for it – 'Blow! Papa blow!' and then, when Ernst first hesitated: 'Please blow! Blow now!' – Ernst was squatting on the garden path with a wire ring and a cup of soapy water.

The first bubble rose over the bean rows, round and trembling, the light of the July afternoon in it. Uwe reached out his hand, burst it and said 'Gone!' He held his hand still a moment in the air. Petra ran after the next one, which the light wind carried away, and threw herself onto it.

Ernst blew on. He watched a bubble drift towards Uwe. Petra was there first. He blew another, this time in Uwe's direction, waited. Petra was there first again.

He saw it. He said nothing. He blew on and thought: this child. He thought it without making a judgement, only an observation that he filed somewhere, not quite knowing where. It was in her, from the beginning, and he knew it and let it rest.

Hedwig came out of the door with plates, cups and a freshly starched tablecloth. She laid the large garden table, which was meant for Sunday afternoons, for coffee and visitors, for such hours.

Ernst saw her and blew another bubble.

'See,' said Hedwig, almost to herself, the cups in her hands, her gaze on Petra who was running after a bubble, 'how he looks at you, child.'

Petra heard the tone. Ernst did not hear it – he was too far away, too much in the moment.

Hedwig went back into the kitchen to fetch the coffee.

It was a good summer. That was what Hedwig had thought when she put the coffee on. France was defeated. The war would soon be over, that was what people said, that was what was in the newspaper, that was what the people at the baker's said and the women after Mass. Ernst would not be called up, he was too old for that, and Werner and Herbert were too young, and by the time they were old enough the weapons would be silent.

The house stood. The bathroom stood. The tiles were white. The crack was repaired.

In the sitting room the radio was still playing, which Ernst had had running since the morning: music, then news, then music again. The news had sounded as always, even and assured, and Hedwig had not listened and had yet heard what she wanted to hear: that everything was in progress. That things were moving in the right direction.

At the horizon, if one looked, the transmitter tower.

Uwe fell asleep at the edge of the sandpit, completely, without warning, his head on his folded arms. Ernst lifted him and laid him on the bench beside the garden table, covered him with his jacket.

Petra watched. Then: 'Me too?'

'Not yet,' said Ernst. 'You are not tired yet.'

'Yes I am,' said Petra.

Ernst looked at her. Hedwig's face from Heinrichau, already at seventeen months, already clear, already just so. Then he laughed, because Petra's lie was so complete, and Petra laughed too, because Ernst laughed.

Hedwig came out of the house with the coffee pot and the cake plate. The cake was ready, the crumbs sat, the surface was right. She set both on the table.

Ernst looked from Petra to Hedwig to the table, to the cake and coffee and sunlight, and thought nothing in particular, only: this is good. This is how it should be.

Petra climbed onto the bench beside the sleeping Uwe and sat upright, hands in her lap, ready.

Later, when they had gone into the house and the children were asleep, Ernst began to sing, unannounced: *Art thou here, laughing fortune* – the first verse, half under his breath, because the song was his and he knew it.

Hedwig, at the foot of the stairs, heard it.

She paused, her hand on the railing, a moment. The song from Heinrichau, from the summer in which Ernst had whistled in the corridors of the monastery and she had carried the tray and not known that someone was watching her. The song was hers as much as his, it had simply become that way, because things became that way when one did not force them.

She stood still a moment on the stairs.

Then she climbed on.

19

The official messenger from the municipal administration came on a Tuesday morning, late in August, shortly after ten.

Ernst was at the office. Hedwig opened the door. The messenger – an older man she knew by sight – held out to her an official envelope and a delivery receipt. She read what she needed to read to understand what it was. Then she signed, with date and time, as he required.

The messenger left. Hedwig closed the door.

She laid the envelope on the kitchen table, unopened, and began to prepare the midday meal. The clock showed ten minutes past ten. From this moment the deadline was running, whether Ernst knew it or not.

He came home shortly before the meal. She pointed to the envelope. He sat down, opened it, read it, once, then a second time, then laid it on the counter.

The children came. One sat down, prayed, ate. Hedwig ladled, ladled more, cleared away.

When the table was empty, she began to write the list.

That was the beginning of the days that followed.

He did not understand it, that was the first thing. France had been defeated for two months. England would follow, it was only a question of time, that was what people said, that was what was between the lines, that was reasonable. He was forty-three, he had a desk position at an important institution, and the war was as good as over.

And now this.

Then the second surprise: where they were sending him.

He had thought – without words and not to the end, but he had thought it – that his work at the RRG would count for something. That one would send someone who had worked in broadcasting to a unit that had to do with broadcasting. Propaganda company. Signals unit. Somewhere where people knew who he was.

Instead: Pioneer Replacement Battalion 8. Cosel, on the Oder.

He had asked someone. Not the colleagues at the RRG – that was not possible, not that. He had found out: pioneers dug trenches. Pioneers built bridges under fire. Pioneers cleared mines. His years at the RRG, the office work, the transmitter – on the call-up order that stood as one line among many other lines. To the conscription board he was a healthy man in his early forties who could handle a shovel and spade. The garden had betrayed him.

Hedwig listened and said nothing. But her face said something she did not say aloud: that this was not what was fitting for a man who had worked at the RRG. Not pioneers. Not Cosel. That was not a reproach to Ernst – Ernst had done nothing wrong. It was simply wrong. It did not fit.

She began to write the second list, for the things Ernst would need to take.

The preparation time was short. The notice gave him three days.

Irma, who now came to the house as a Pflichtjahr girl, tried to help. That was the problem with Irma: she always tried to help, and it never helped. She packed the washing wrong – the undervests on top, not underneath, because on top was easier to reach, without understanding that that was not the point. She took the twins for a walk at the wrong time, precisely when Hedwig would have needed her to make room in the room. Hedwig did everything herself,

without saying anything, because saying it would have taken longer than doing the things herself.

Hedwig sewed Ernst's name into the washing: into every piece, in order, with the firm stitch that did not come undone. Undervests, socks, the field blouse. She put the things in the bag he would take, as she packed everything: completely, nothing forgotten, the order logical. She wrote to Vika: Ernst is being called up, pioneers, Cosel. She inspected the cellar and wrote down what was missing for the winter.

In the days between the notice and the departure they spoke about what needed to be spoken about: the powers of attorney, the savings, the account, the garden.

'Leave the poles until October,' said Ernst one evening, at supper, in passing. 'Then pull them out, otherwise they rot in the ground. Leave the apples on the tree still, take the ones from the trellis first, otherwise they fall.'

Hedwig nodded. 'I know.'

'I'll go through the potatoes before I leave.'

It was not a farewell sentence and not a testament. It was what he said because he knew the garden and because he knew her.

'Good,' said Hedwig.

Ernst was still there, but his attention had changed.

He looked at the children, sometimes longer than necessary: Werner at supper, Herbert playing in the garden, Klaus who helped him with the cellar inspection. His eyes rested on each child a moment before moving on.

He went once more to his hedges at the tower. Alone, one afternoon, with the hedge shears. The hedges were in good order; there was little to do. He stood a while on the site and looked at the tower, the hundred and twelve metres of larch wood, sharp in the August light. Then he cut what needed cutting and went.

He went through the garden, one evening, shortly before dark, and inspected everything: the trellis, the fruit trees, the beans, heavy now in August, the arbour at the south wall full of leaf. He stood a moment before it.

Hedwig saw him through the kitchen window. She stirred the soup and said nothing.

The twins could walk steadily now, their arms no longer held out, their steps had grown longer. That something was different about Ernst they felt. What, they did not know. The games were

the same. The laughter was the same. But the body was different, and the children noticed that first.

Ernst held them longer.

At the bouncing-horse game he did not let the knee drop at the end, not any more. Instead he held Petra up, a moment too long, before lowering her slowly – not the dramatic dropping that made her laugh, but the quiet holding that was something else and that Petra felt without being able to name it: not the game, not quite.

From his knee: her gaze, his face, nothing between.

Ernst looked back.

The departure was on Friday morning, early.

The family stood before the front door. Ernst said farewell to each child. Werner, thirteen years old, almost as tall as Ernst, stood straight. Ernst laid his hand briefly on his shoulder, a moment. Werner said nothing. Ernst said: 'Look after the others.' Werner nodded.

With Herbert: brief, because Herbert never needed much. A hand on the head, rough, as one does it when one has to do it quickly.

With Klaus: a laugh, a nudge in the ribs. 'Look after your mother.' Klaus laughed, because Ernst laughed, but his look was uncertain, because he knew the laughter and did not know the undertone.

Then the twins.

Uwe he lifted briefly, held him, set him down. Uwe reached for his uniform collar and was distracted by it.

Then Petra.

He lifted her and held her as he had always held her, both hands under her arms. Her face level with his. Hedwig's face from Heinrichau, the broad shoulders. He did not know how old this face would be when he saw it again.

He set her down.

Petra reached for his hand. The small fingers closed around his index finger, not tightly, only so.

He did not free the fingers.

He stood like that a moment, Petra beside him, the hand around his finger, and looked at the front garden, at the path to the garden gate, at the houses opposite. Then he crouched down to her level and said something into her hair, quietly, that the morning did not record.

Hedwig saw it. She said nothing.

Ernst stood up. He took the bag that stood beside the front door and gave Hedwig his hand.

'Come back safely,' said Hedwig.

That was her whole prayer to him, spoken aloud: complete, sincere, without remainder.

Ernst looked at her, a moment. Then he said: 'Yes.'

He went down the garden path, through the gate, along the street, without turning round. Then he turned into the Lublinitzer Straße and was gone.

Werner, Herbert and Klaus ran into the house to fetch their school bags. Uwe followed them. Then the three older ones went to school, without many words, because all the words had already been said.

Petra had remained standing in the front garden and was looking at the garden gate.

The August was already warm despite the early hour. From the street nothing more was to be heard.

Hedwig stepped beside her.

'Come in,' said Hedwig. 'Irma will be here soon.'

Petra came. But before she stepped into the house she turned once more towards the gate, briefly, her head to the right, as though there were still something there that might look back.

There was nothing.

20

Ernst came in mid-November, fifteen months after his call-up, on the early train from Breslau – as one came home when one came from far away: in stages, by detours, through junctions whose names one did not know. When Hedwig opened the front door it was still dark, breath hung in the air, and the street was empty. He stood there with his rucksack. She stepped one step to the side so that the light from the hallway fell on him, and let her gaze run down him, briefly, once, from the shoulders to the hands, to the legs, up again. Then she saw it: he had grown thinner, not in a way that came from poor food.

She let him in.

Werner came down the stairs, quietly, because he had already been awake. Ernst went towards him and wanted to take hold of his shoulders – but Werner extended his hand, the right one, straight out, and waited. Ernst looked at the hand for a moment. Then he took it. Firm, brief. In the year in which they had not seen each other, something had come of Werner that required this hand, and Ernst understood.

Herbert came after, Herbert was always after. Klaus was still asleep; he woke when Ernst called his name loudly and came, immediately wide awake, as though he had only been waiting for the sound.

From above one heard the twins, a stirring, then Petra's voice, clear and certain: 'Vati is here.' It was not a question. It was a fact. Then the clatter on the stairs, and Petra, who was below Uwe and went towards Ernst without hesitating – she was almost three, she knew this face, she had not forgotten it.

Ernst lifted her. He held her longer than usual.

The days were different from the August of the previous year, in a way that was not easily named.

Ernst was there, he ate, he smoked, he went into the garden and looked at the fruit trees that now stood bare, the bean stalks frosted off, the beds prepared for winter. He spoke with Werner and explained something about the trellis. He played with the twins in the evenings, the lifting, the hiding. The laughter was the same laughter.

But he always sat now with his back to the wall.

Hedwig noticed it on the second evening. He had sat down at the kitchen table, and without thinking – so it seemed – had chosen the bench that stood against the wall, and had sat so that he had the door in view. She said nothing. On the third evening it was the same.

He slept. That was the striking thing: he slept much, deeply, more than she had ever seen him sleep. She heard it through the night – this heavy, almost immovable sleeping, from which he did not even wake when Klaus did not stop coughing in the night and she got up to look at him.

One evening at the beginning of the last week of leave Hedwig was washing up. The children were asleep. Ernst sat at the radio in the sitting room, she heard the music muffled through the wall, then silence, then music again. The bowls, the cutlery, the pots: the order was always the same.

Ernst came into the kitchen. He wanted to pour himself some water. He stepped past her, reached for the glass that stood on the shelf behind her, and his hand moved quickly and close past her face.

Hedwig stepped back – for a moment, barely perceptibly: her head to one side, half a step back, her shoulders up. Then she stood again where she had stood, her hands in the water.

Ernst had not noticed. He poured the water and went back.

Hedwig let the water run over her hands.

She knew what it was. Hanna's hands, which had moved too quickly, too unpredictably, too often – the hands of a woman who struck when it was too much for her, and which also moved otherwise as though they came faster than the eyes could follow. The body had learned that early. It did not forget, even when the head had long since moved on. That was no reproach, not any more. It was a trace that had remained, and Ernst's hands had nothing to do with it.

She wrung out the cloth and wiped the counter.

From Frau Thienel, whose husband Max had been in Russia since the summer, Hedwig had heard that there had been constant frost there since October. Minus twenty, Frau Thienel had said, and then fallen silent, as though waiting for someone to explain what it meant: minus twenty, and the men had received no winter equipment, because it had been thought the campaign would be over before winter.

Hedwig had nodded and walked on. But the sentence had stayed.

On the evening when Ernst sat smoking at the kitchen table and she had her darning before her, she asked, without looking up: 'Do you have enough warm things?'

Ernst drew on the cigarette. He was silent a moment longer than necessary. 'It's all right.'

'That is not an answer.'

'I'll pack some more.' He stubbed out the cigarette, too soon. 'It is cold there. That is true.'

He said no more. Hedwig looked at the sock she held in her hand. It had a gap at the heel that she had darned twice already. She began to darn it a third time.

What she thought: that *it's all right* and *I'll pack some more* was what he could say, and that neither was the same as *warm enough*. That minus twenty was a number she could not picture, because she had never been in such cold. That the lung became inflamed when one was too long in the cold, she knew that – two of her brothers had had it, as children, and she still knew how that had sounded.

Ernst was no longer smoking. He just sat there.

She darned the sock. Then she folded it carefully and took another from the basket.

The departure was the next morning, in the grey of the early December morning.

Ernst said farewell to the children quickly, because quickly was right: Klaus on the shoulder, Herbert briefly, Werner with the look that held no expectation. The twins stood in the hallway, and Ernst knelt down and pressed both briefly to him, together, one in each arm, and then stood up.

Hedwig held out his rucksack. Then she held out the wool socks, the pair she had already knitted in the days before.

'You did not pack these,' she said.

Ernst looked at the socks. Then he took them and put them in the rucksack, without saying anything.

At the door: 'Come back safely.'

'Yes,' said Ernst.

He went. The door fell shut.

Hedwig stood in the hallway.

Shortly afterwards Werner, Herbert and Klaus took their school bags. They went out together, the door fell, and the house was quiet.

Hedwig went into the sitting room. There stood Petra on a chair at the window looking at the front garden.

Hedwig opened the drawer in the sideboard and took out the started pair of socks. She would finish knitting them. Not to send them after Ernst. Only because the hands needed something to do, and because warmth was the only thing one could send from here.

She sat down and took up the knitting needles.

21

The potatoes needed peeling.

She took the knife, laid the first potato in her hand, and began as she always began: the knife close to the skin, no waste, even strips. The peel fell into the bowl, the potato onto the board. The second. The third.

Through the window: the Brinkmann farm, the cobblestones. The pail at the pump that Karl Temme had left standing this morning. The air, which smelled of damp straw and of the spring that was not yet warm enough to smell of spring, but no longer cold enough to smell of winter.

That was Steinbeck. That was the Brinkmanns' kitchen, March 1947, another Thursday morning.

The old Frau Brinkmann sat at the table peeling carrots. Her hands steady, her face bent down, close to the work, because the eyes no longer gave everything. She did not look up when Hedwig had come in, but she had nodded, briefly, without looking. The farmer's wife stood at the stove. She stirred something, set a pot down, took another.

The two farmer's wives, the old and the young, were in the same room, each at her work, and between them lay a quiet that was not tension but familiarity: the quiet of people who have shared the same room for years and have no reason to fill it with words. The old Frau Brinkmann said something, briefly, in the dialect Hedwig did not quite understand, and the farmer's wife answered without turning round, and then it was quiet again.

Hedwig peeled the potatoes and saw it and did not see it: this silence between mother and daughter that had its own quality, which she knew and did not know, because she had not known it like that from her own mother. She peeled on.

She thought of the letter.

The letter that lay in the tin, together with the family photograph, and that was written in the fine handwriting: Ernst, who was learning English in America and watching oranges fall from trees. The sentence she could not say to him, because he was not back yet and because one did not write that in a letter: *You wanted to sell the house. I did not give way. The house is gone nonetheless.*

That was a sentence she would never speak aloud, not before Ernst, not before Vika, not before herself in the way one says sentences to oneself. It was simply there, unnamed, without form: every day she carried it with her into the kitchen, invisible as habit.

She had not given way. That was true. That was the point to which she could think.

The fourth potato. The fifth.

'Leave the potatoes whole,' said the farmer's wife, without turning round. 'They cook better that way.'

'Yes,' said Hedwig.

She left the potatoes whole. That was possible. One could do it this way or that way, it was a question of method. Hedwig knew the difference between the two. The farmer's wife did not need to.

Petra stood in the doorway.

Hedwig knew it without turning round. The child stood there and looked as it always stood and looked, with that attentiveness that understood nothing and saw everything. Eight years old, the hair grown back, the knees slightly bent, the weight on the balls of its feet.

Hedwig did not turn to her.

Not to rebuff her. But because she was unable to stand under this look that sought what was not there, or what was there and had no form that Hedwig could give it. Her back was the only answer she had.

The hands did what they always did.

Meanwhile she murmured, half without noticing: *Holy God, we praise Thy name* – the first line, the melody that came out of her when the hands were occupied and the head took a rest. It was not a prayer. It was a breathing.

The old Frau Brinkmann laid down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron. Then she raised her head in Hedwig's direction, her gaze a little past its mark, as always.

'Hark at that,' she said, to no one or to Hedwig or to the kitchen as a whole: the *hark at that* that was genuine curiosity and not mere expression.

Hedwig laid the peeled potatoes in the water. She wiped her hands on her apron.

Through the window: the yard, the pump, the wayside cross at the green island towards the road. The cross stood as it had always stood.

The day went on. That was all.

22

On another day, in the room, she took the tin down from the shelf.

The marriage certificate, the birth certificates, the title documents for the house in Petersberg, which interested no one any more except her. The letter. The photograph. She sat down at the table and unfolded the letter. The children were at school. The house was quiet.

Ernst wrote without complaint and as he always wrote. He wrote that he was well. The food. The English. *I can already say how are you quite well now, it sounds almost like a real American.*

The orange plantations, the irrigation channels, the machine that shook the fruit down. *You would not believe how they do that.* He hoped to be coming home soon. No date.

And before that, almost in passing, between a sentence about the camp and the next about the weather: *Near Pilsen was the end, then we came to Bavaria and into captivity, and then it was so.*

Hedwig read the sentence and read on. That was past. What interested her came after: *Now I am in California, where Emil is.*

When she had come to the end of reading the letter, Hedwig paused. The letters, large and even, as they had always been. She looked at them a moment.

Ernst had got the position at the RRG because of his handwriting. That was how it had been: a superior had seen him once in the writing room, had looked at the letters and praised them, and out of that a clerical post had come. That was how such things went sometimes. One was noticed, and out of being noticed something grew.

She folded the letter and laid it on the table.

She had told the farmer's wife that Ernst now spoke perfect English. In passing, while peeling potatoes, a few weeks after the care package. Ernst was also studying modern farming methods over there, she had said, in America they did it that way, the irrigation, the machine harvesting, it was very advanced. He would come back as a man who had seen something others had not seen.

The farmer's wife had nodded without putting the potato down.

Now she heard footsteps before the kitchen door. Karl Temme, with the wood for the farmer's wife's stove. He came in, put the logs in the box, piece by piece. Hedwig peeled on without looking up.

The children were at school. Petra was at school.

She laid down the knife, dried her hands and went up to her bedroom. On Petra's bed lay the doll. She took it and laid it in the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers, under the wool fleeces that lay there and waited for nothing. Then she went back into the Brinkmanns' kitchen and peeled on.

She thought of Klaus.

Vati is learning now in America, even though he is already past forty, she had said. *If Vati can do that, you can too.* Klaus had been having difficulties at the Steinbeck village school: the other children, the teacher, the dialect that was not his, the exercise books that were never as neat as

they should be. Hedwig had held the father up to him, and Klaus had listened and said nothing. What he had thought about that she did not know. That was not territory she entered.

The peanut butter tins stood on the shelf, their labels facing forward. One was open. The six others not yet broached – and the furthest back was for Ernst.

Hedwig looked at them.

She thought, briefly, of what she would say when he came back: *Your brother sent something.* Nothing more. What he would say to that she did not know. Perhaps he would be pleased, with the smile Ernst had when something surprised him. She would not like that. Perhaps he would say: a good fellow, Emil. She would not like that either. Perhaps he would say nothing.

That would hurt least.

Once, briefly, the thought: *Perhaps we should have sold the house.*

Ernst had proposed that, on an October evening in 1939, quietly, after supper, as though he had thought about it for a long time. She had said no. The house was gone nonetheless.

To this point she could think. That was the point where she stopped. Not because the next thought was unknown. But because the next thought would be a question, and the question would be one she could not ask herself without calling everything into question, and calling everything into question was not what a woman in the Brinkmanns' lodgings with three children and a husband in captivity did, a woman who carried on, because carrying on was the only thing that helped.

She rearranged the peanut butter tins and pushed the one reserved for Ernst half a centimetre further back.

Then she opened the tin of papers and took out first the family photograph and then Ernst's letter. She thought that she needed to write to Vika. When Ernst was coming back she did not know – soon, the letter said, and soon was no date – but when he came back Vika should know. Vika had a view of Ernst that she had never expressed directly, but which always sounded through when she asked about him: whether he was well provided for, whether he wrote, what the Americans were doing with him. Hedwig knew what lay behind the questions, and she found it tiresome, and she liked it nonetheless, because Vika was the only person to whom she could complain without it having consequences.

She laid the letter back on the photograph, put everything in the tin.

Then she folded her hands. The Hail Mary, quietly, her lips moving: the words she spoke every day, Ernst in them, unnamed. Our Lady knew whom she meant.

She stood up and put the tin back on the shelf.

Then she hummed, without noticing, the melody: *Art thou here, laughing fortune* – only the melody, no words, the notes that came out of her when something else was working.

Petra came home, from school, the cloth bag still over her shoulder. Hedwig glanced up briefly.

The child moved through the room in a way Hedwig knew: she lifted her head slightly, shoulders back, already before she opened the door.

'Aunt Vika is coming the day after tomorrow,' said Hedwig. 'She looks carefully.'

No reproach, no praise. Only the sentence.

Petra put down the bag.

Later Petra looked for the doll. She checked on the floor, under the bed, on the shelf beside the egg cup. Then she stopped.

She knew who had taken the doll. She did not ask.

23

Klaus and Uwe were outside. Hedwig stood at the stove and cooked. The room was still in the way it was still only when Hedwig was alone with Petra.

Petra sat on the floor, knees drawn up, and looked.

She had looked since she could think. That was the first thing Hedwig knew about her, the first that came before everything else: Petra looked. Not Klaus, who spoke and asked and demanded. Not Uwe, who waited and followed. Petra looked, with a directness that Hedwig did not understand, because this look had no equivalent in her. It was not a look for the bowls or for the wall or for the stove. It was a look for her.

Hedwig stirred in the pot and knew it, without looking.

What Petra saw in this back she did not know. The shoulders, the movement of the arm while stirring, the hair that she put up in a knot in the morning and that loosened during the day. Those were Hedwig's shoulders, Hedwig's back: Petra knew them better than her own face, because one had known the mother's back from birth, before one knew anything else. She sought something in it. What she sought had no name, not even for Petra.

The room was clean. That was always so. The stove was hers, the shelf was orderly, the bowls stood on the table. Hedwig spoke, when she spoke, without circumlocution and without fuss. The child would learn what children learned: that one showed through outward appearance

who one was, that one held one's own, that one was silent when the situation required silence. These were not lessons that were put into words. They lay in everything, in the smell of the stove and the order of the bowls and in the back that was turned to the child.

Hedwig put down the spoon.

She turned and stepped towards Petra. Not because something needed to be said, not because the time was right. Because in this moment she thought of it: the bald child on the floor of the gymnasium in Troppau, two years ago, the lice, and the fever that was not permitted to come and had not come. The child who was now eight years old and whose hair had grown back and whom she sometimes checked in the night, half asleep, before lying down again.

She took the egg cup from the shelf, dipped her thumb, drew the cross on Petra's forehead. First down, then across.

No prayer, no order. Only the thumb that did it. It was her sign of protection, the only one she had: the thumb on the forehead of the child, the holy water that had been poured for months from the cough mixture bottle into the egg cup.

The thumb remained a heartbeat too long.

Petra closed her eyes.

Then she reached for it. The small fingers closed around Hedwig's hand, not tightly, only so – the question that was always the same, that had no answer and was asked nonetheless, every time.

Hedwig freed the fingers, calmly, without impatience.

'Sit down,' she said.

Petra sat down. What the child still needed – a look that looked back, an answer to the looking – that was not a thought that came to Hedwig. Not because she deflected it. It simply did not exist, in the language she had.

Later, after the meal, when Hedwig was clearing the table.

Petra had reached for the sugar bowl that stood in the middle of the table and that was only for the coffee, which was only for Hedwig. Not from hunger, only so, the hand on its way there, as though she had forgotten that she was not allowed.

Hedwig struck her, once, with the flat of her hand, not hard, but firmly. 'One does not touch that.'

That was the sentence. No second blow. Petra drew back her hand. The evening went on.

The evening prayer.

Klaus and Uwe and Petra knelt at the edges of the beds, their hands folded. Hedwig knelt before them, on the floorboards.

'Our Father, who art in heaven,' said Hedwig. 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' said the children.

The Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the petitions: for Ernst, for Werner, for Herbert. Petra spoke with closed eyes, as always. Klaus spoke loudly and steadily. Uwe looked sometimes at the ceiling, where the crack ran through the wood.

The form held as it always held, because forms held when one gave them what they needed: every evening, the same words, the same knees on the floor.

After the Amen the sign of the cross, the egg cup, the thumb. Then: 'Sleep.'

Hedwig stayed in the front room when the children were in the back.

She tidied what still needed tidying. Then, without thinking about it, she began to sing: *Holy God, we praise Thy name* – half under her breath, half a verse, because the evening had been good, as far as evenings were good. The song came as it sometimes came, when the work did what work does and the head fell behind it.

From the back room: silence that slowly deepened.

Petra heard the melody, through the thin plank wall that stood towards the beds. The melody came and grew quieter and remained there nonetheless, like something that settles before one sleeps.

Then, through the north wall, the voice of the old farmer's wife: brief, something Hedwig did not understand, in the dialect for which she had no language. Then Anna Brinkmann's answer. Then a laugh, quiet, muffled, that the wall did not quite muffle: the sound of the laughter of two people who have known each other for years and who have shared the laughter before the words came, the sound that needed no explanation.

Hedwig heard it. She said nothing.

She turned out the light.

And then it was still, and the stove was still drawing, and Hedwig stood at the stove, her back to the room, her back to the door behind which Petra slept or did not sleep.

'What are you staring at,' she said, without turning round.

No answer. Only the stillness of the back room, the stillness of a child that perhaps slept and perhaps still looked, through the plank wall, through the room.

Hedwig stayed standing.

24

It had not frozen overnight.

Hedwig noticed it when she opened the flat door: the air that met her was cold, but different from winter, softer, with something behind it that had no name yet. The steps of the outside staircase were dry. She took hold of the railing and went down, the empty pail in her free hand, slowly – not because she was afraid of falling, but because she could not afford a fall.

Below, on the cobblestones of the yard, the air stood still.

She stepped to the pump.

The handle yielded at the first push – the seal was no longer cold, spring had begun, that always showed first at the pump. The water came immediately, dark and icy, and filled the pail. Her hands went numb after the third stroke, as always.

She let go of the handle.

And then she looked.

The cross stood at the green island towards the road, as it had always stood: the stone Christ, arms outstretched, the base dark from the night's moisture. The birch tree behind it had the first leaves, delicate, barely more than a suggestion of green, the light of early dawn behind it. The green island, the cobblestones, the yard, the lean-to, the stable wall – all of it was there, as every morning, in the same order.

Hedwig looked longer than usual.

She did not think: he is coming back. She did not think: he is not coming back. She thought the word she thought every morning, but today it was different, not as consolation, but as what it was: an observation, matter-of-fact, complete.

Provisional.

This was provisional. It had always been provisional, from the beginning: the room above the calf pen, the wooden staircase, the narrow room, the plank wall. The house in Petersberg had been provisional, even though it had not felt that way, even though the bathroom and the tiles and the linoleum in the hallway had felt like something solid, something that stood. The conversation of the October evening 1939 had been provisional. Ernst, who had gone to work in the morning and been sent straight home again, because of the general situation – that had

been provisional, and then it had become provisional differently, and then the radio had said something, and then Ernst had been called up, and the house was gone, and now it was this.

Everything was provisional.

The cross stood.

That was the only thought that gave her something this morning: the cross stood, as it had stood when Anna Brinkmann's grandfather was still alive, as it had stood when everything here was still different, as it would stand when this here had long since become something else again. It did not answer what she thought. It stood. That was all. It was enough.

Hedwig looked and thought: it stands.

She took the pail and went back to the stairs.

The steps, the steps, the steps: seventeen, she knew them all, the second from the top was the steepest, the fifth was loose if one stepped too close to the right edge. She climbed, the pail in one hand, the other on the railing, the weight of the water pulling at her shoulder.

On the stairs, her lips moving, the morning prayer: the Lord's Prayer, quietly, the words that came like breath, because for decades they had been the same, in the same moments, with the same words. Then the Hail Mary. Then no further sentence, not today, because the prayer was complete and because the stairs had ended.

Above: the door.

The room was cold. The stove still waited; that was the first step, the fire, then the water, then the breakfast. The warmth was not yet there, the day had not yet begun.

Hedwig set down the pail.

Through the window of the front room, which faced west, the wayside cross was still to be seen: the light now brighter than below, the birch tree behind it in the spring light, the first green that was not yet green, only the promise of it.

Then she heard it: the door to the back room, the faint scratching of the door against the frame that had shifted in winter and never quite stood straight again.

Petra had woken without Hedwig having woken her, and stood there, her hair tousled, eyes half open, her body still half in sleep. She stood in the doorway, upright.

She looked.

Hedwig saw it without turning round, because after eight years one knew: the child that looks, the gaze that lay on one like a hand. The same gesture as always, the same seeking, the same question that found no answer, not today, not on this morning, not in this room.

'Come,' said Hedwig. 'I am making the porridge now.'

She turned to the stove.

Outside stood the cross.

It was older than anything Hedwig could see, older than the farm and the birch tree and the road that curved past before it. It would be standing when this here had long since become something else again.

It stood now. That was enough.